さくら荘のペットな彼女 4

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普通科二年生のプログラマー。
チャットかメールでしか
会話をしない引き籠もりだったが、
出席日数が足りず部屋から出てきた。
102号室在住。

青山七海（あおやまななみ）

水明芸術大学付属高校普通科二年で、
空太のクラスメイト。
バイトで自活しながら、声優養成所に通う
頑張り屋さん。203号室在住。

※このイラストはイメージです。

「ふーぁ、せんぱーい」

小井土愛咲

NO一ル侵害禁止。

普通科二年生で、ましろ当番。
真摯に漫画に取り組むましろの姿に触発され、
ゲームクリエイターを目指している。101号室在住。

神田空太（かんだそらた）

「な、なにしてんだよ！」

椎名ましろ（しいな）

美術科の二年生で、漫画家としてデビューした。
その生活破綻っぷりと天然扇情発言で、
空太を振り回す。202号室在住。

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Prologue

Love.

Was that what she said?

Chapter 1 - Sakurasou's Culture Festival

Part 1

With the light of the sunset shining down on them, Sorata Kanda was standing face to face with Mashiro Shiina at the observation deck of Narita Airport.

“What happened to me.”

As if she was trying to suppress her nervousness, Mashiro clenched her hands that were resting on her chest. The action gave off such a slender and detailed feeling; making Mashiro appear to be even more fragile than she is.

“Hey, Sorata.”

Her usually certain voice now sounded somewhat weak.

“W-What is it?”

“Is this…”

Mashiro’s cheeks glowed red as she looked down. Sorata could feel that it wasn’t just because of the sunlight.

“S-Shiina?”

Sorata wanted to speak further, but when Mashiro looked at him with her crystal clear eyes, all he could mutter out was her name.

“…”

The sudden silence was hard to put up with so Sorata gulped. However, no matter what he tried, his heartbeat wouldn’t slow down and neither did Mashiro back off.

“Could …”

“… Shiina.”

“This be…”

“…”

His heart screamed out for Mashiro to stop, but no sound escaped from his lips. However, a short sound squeezed out from Mashiro's thin lips.

"Love."

A quiet sound. It was a quiet yet certain voice. Sorata's heart was beating crazily and every cell of his body was raging. His emotions suddenly lit up.

"I- I…. I…"

A voice inside him echoed 'Say it… just say it'

"… Sorata?"

"I- I've thought of you… that's, uh…."

Say it. Just speak out our thoughts boldly…

"I… like!"

"I know."

"Huh?"

What do you know?

"I know how Sorata feels."

"Shiina…"

Shiina wore a natural smile that took away all of Sorata's strength. She looked at him with a loving gaze. His heart beat uncontrollably and he wanted to jump up and down.

"I- I!"

Just when Sorata had gathered enough courage to say it, Mashiro stopped Sorata with her hand.

"But I can't accept Sorata's feelings."

"…Huh?"

What did Mashiro just say?

“W-What are you saying? W-we feel the same way, right?”

“Right.”

“T-Then why?”

“A painful past is necessary to pilot Nyaboron.”

“… Huh?”

What was Mashiro saying.

“But it’s OK.”

“No, no. I don’t think your head is OK at all.”

“By losing my precious Sorata, my negative engine will forever go on.”

“Yep, you’re not OK at all!”

“I will destroy every single Nyangolownians out there.”

“Saying that doesn’t make me feel any better!”

“Then, farewell.”

“No, wait…!”

Chasing after the disappearing figure, Sorata grabbed her shoulders and turned her around.

“Huh?”

As if using she used magic, the person who had been Mashiro until just now, turned into his school senior, Misaki Kamiigusa.

“W-What happened?!”

“That’s so unmanly of you, Kohai-kun! For you to be this weak! Straighten yourself up for the sake of humanity!”

Misaki widely swung her hand around.

“Ah, hold on, Senpai!”

“No!”

With a manly response, Misaki presented Sorata with a strong slap. The clear slap sound rang out.

“What the hell~!”

Shouting ‘What the hell~!’ at the nonsensical development, Sorata regained his senses. Until now, he was at the airport but the sight that he saw was his familiar 3 tatami[1] sized room.

Sakurasou, one of the dorms of Suimei High School of the Arts. And this was the Room 101. Exciting sketches of「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」covered the walls and the seven stray cats that he picked up were sound asleep on the bed.

It was a room that Sorata knew quite well.

“… So I’ve been dreaming ‘till now and this is the reality.”

He was somewhat glad but he was also feeling let down at the same time.

“Anyhow, to think that I slept while standing.”

When Sorata opened his eyes, he was standing up inside his room for some reason. But it wasn’t that strange to him because he didn’t have time to sleep over the past week due to the production of「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」in order to meet the deadline.

His eyes teared up when he loudly yawned. It covered his eyes.

He was able to come back from the dream world for now, but he felt like sleeping again.

“And what was I dreaming about in the first place…”

Even if all of his focus had been on the production, to think that Nyaboron would take over his dreams…. And the same could be said about Mashiro. What was he making her do in his dreams. Things between them has gotten awkward ever since Rita,

Mashiro's former roommate, tried to take her back to England…. Thinking about the time Sorata shouted "Don't go" as he hugged Mashiro tight still made him blush furiously. After that dream just now, it'll be even harder to face her again.

"Kohai-kun, you awake?"

He rubbed his closing eyes. The one who spoke to him was the alien from Room 201-Misaki Kamiigusa. Now that he thought about it, Misaki slapped him in his dream. No, he could feel his left cheek still throbbing.

"This may be a sudden question, but how did you wake me up, Misaki-senpai?"

"I woke you up according to the customs of the land."

"I don't think waking someone up by slapping him can be considered to be a custom of any land!"

"I didn't slap you! I was practicing my signature!"

Misaki spouted out some nonsense as usual.

"Signature?"

"Here, mirror."

Sorata unwillingly checked his face's reflection on the hand mirror that Misaki handed over.

"We~ll, this is how it looks on the front, so what do you think?"

Sorata decided to ignore the hair salon-like act. That was because he had something to say to her.

On his left cheek, there was a handprint of sticky red paint. Of course, Misaki's right hand was covered in red paint as well.

"Who do you think you are to have a signature like this! And don't have a signature like this in the first place!"

"I'm glad that Kohai-kun is happy."

“I’m not happy, I’m being angry because I was slapped!”

“It was Kohai-kun’s fault for sleeping while standing up.”

“Giraffes in savannas sleep while standing still! Don’t look down on nature!”

“They sleep while wrapping their neck around in the zoos!”

“That’s because they’re being lazy since there are no predators after them! They lost the nature’s touch!”

“I get that you’re a professional when it comes to giraffe trivia, so pipe down. I can’t hear anything.”

The one who told Sorata that was the person who was checking the screen of the TV-Jin Mitaka. He was the handsome third year who lived in Room 103 and was the childhood friend of Misaki. The reason why his eyes were glued to the screen was because he was in the middle of debugging「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」’s drama parts.

“And go to school, Misaki. You need to promote our work and make the preparations.”

“Yep! I’ll come and pick it up at lunch, so finish it by then!”

Misaki ran out as soon as she finished saying that. How can she have that much energy. Just like Sorata who was tired enough to sleep on his feet and Jin who was yawning every 3 seconds, Misaki hadn’t slept either. Did she have an unlimited energy source in her? If she did, it would be nice if she used it for the good of human kind.

As Sorata watched the door that Misaki just went out of, Jin muttered to himself.

“I never would’ve thought that we would finish this off on the day we present it…”

“I feel the same way.”

Sorata agreed with Jin and slumped down next to him.

Today was the 7th of November.

It was the 5th day into the culture festival, which started on the 3rd of November. The culture festival which was held along with the associated university lasted for a whole

week.

「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」 should've been completed nearly 10 days ago…. No, according to the schedule, it should've been completed 10 days ago. However, Misaki ordered for the 3D model data to be rewritten because she wasn't satisfied with the quality, and that fired up Mashiro to increase the scenes for the drama part. When Ryuunosuke should've stopped the two, he said that there was a shadier technique that he wanted to try out so he extended the deadline as well…. They were going to present it on the opening day of the festival, but 「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」 still hasn't been completed yet.

Thanks to that, the sleeping hours of the Sakurasou tenants decreased each day, ever since the start of the culture festival. Needless to say, they couldn't participate in the festival at all.

However, all of their hard work was finally going to pay off. After a few hours, the 「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」will finally be done, and they will be able to present it.

Having said that, they were already worn out, and they were just about to be tempted to sleep even at the slightest whisper.

"Jin-senpai."

"What is it?"

"I want to let my upper and lower eyelids reunite sometime soon."

"Go and wash your face to wake yourself up. Get that leaf[2] off your face while you're at it."

"Ah, you're right. I forgot about it."

Sorata couldn't sleep yet. When Jin finishes debugging the drama part, it was Sorata's time to shine and check for the battle parts by doing a test run. He then had to hand over the results to Ryuunosuke, who was silently typing away on the keyboard, so that he can do the final fix.

If the final production was up to a satisfactory level, their work 「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」 would finally be complete- after 2 months of desperate efforts.

Reflecting back on it, it has been a long, yet short time. A lot of things happened

especially during October.

One day, Sorata got into a heated argument with Ryuunosuke over the battle parts.

“Kanda’s suggestion of adding extra movement isn’t considering the crowd at all. It goes against the director’s heat. So it’s refused.”

Sorata was completely looked down upon like that, and when Misaki was pouring out countless of suggestions and ideas,

“It would be great if we can do all that, but we can’t do it because the lack of time!”

And lost himself like that.

One time, they had to remake the graphic the data due to missing the ordering of them, and there has been an instance when an important part of the production wasn’t completed on time. They were able to be where they are now after all those efforts.

Thinking of those days, Sorata let out a

“Hupp,”

Sound and walked into the hallway.

Swaying while walking, he leaned on the wall and went inside the bathroom. Not thinking that someone would be occupying the bathroom, Sorata opened the door without thinking.

“Kyaa.”

Hearing the short yell, Sorata looked up and made eye-contact with the tenant of Room 203, Nanami Aoyama. Facing her back towards him, Nanami hugged her shoulders with her hands and covered her chest up. She didn’t have anything on her as she stood on top of the scales. Her school uniform was heaped up in a small mound on the floor. Since it was only normal to take off clothes from the upper layers first, a pair of sky blue underwear were placed at the top.

“K-Kanda?”

Switching to her dialect, Nanami looked at Sorata in surprise.

“H-Hey.”

Even if they were on friendly terms with each other, Sorata had to be formal. He greeted her first.

"…"

But unfortunately, Nanami didn't answer back. Instead, her well developed figure started to tremble and she breathed in deeply.

"Whoa~! Hold on, Aoyama!"

Sorata's attempt to stop her and Nanami's yell took place at almost the same time.

"Kyaaaaaaaa!"

As expected of a voice actress student. The yell that came from the stomach was strong enough to make the atmosphere tremble.

If he didn't block out his ears by instinct, he would've been stunned by that yell.

"W-What are ya looking at~!"

Blushing bright red, Nanami grabbed a washing basket near-by and threw it at him.

Sensing the danger, Sorata quickly caught it with both of his hands.

"Good."

"D-Don't catch it~!"

"O-Oops!"

He should've backed off a long time ago.

"S-Sorrry!"

Shivering from the rage and the embarrassment building up inside her, Nanami let out a scream again.

"Kyaaaaa!"

"I'm really sorry!"

Sorata quickly closed the bathroom door. He apologised to Nanami again through the door.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t do it on purpose!”

“I-If an apology is enough, then why are there the police force!”

“That’s a good point… but the sign that says it’s being used by girls isn’t on!”

“No way, that’s… wait… because I didn’t plan to take my clothes off.…”

“Huh? Then why were you all naked?”

Sorata remembered that Nanami was standing on the scales. He could guess why she was naked.

“I-It doesn’t concern you, does it.”

“Did you lose a kilo after taking your clothes off?”

“I-I gained a bit because I haven’t weighed myself in a while, so it’s not like I’m blaming my clothes. I-It’s not like I gained weight anyway! It’s just all in the head…”

Nanami was fairly desperate. It seemed like she wasn’t able to see the figure that she wanted to see even after weighing herself stark naked…

“There’s an urban myth that says that you’ll weigh less if you lift up a leg.”

“…”

As soon as Sorata jokingly said an advice that no-one would believe, Nanami quietened down for a moment.

“… Aoyama?”

“Y-You liar! It increased instead!”

“Isn’t it because you shifted your centre of gravity?”

Imagining Nanami trying to balance herself on her leg… while standing on the scales stark naked, Sorata couldn’t help but to laughed out loud.

“D-Don’t laugh!”

The readings on the scale must’ve been very important to Nanami.

After waiting for a while, the bathroom door opened from the inside. Nanami came out after wearing her school uniform. She was certainly discomforted. No, she could be just embarrassed.

“What’s with your face?”

She pointed at the handprint on Sorata’s face.

“I was attacked by the alien.”

Nanami didn’t ask for anything else. She must’ve thought that it was going to be a pain to listen to it.

“Uh… sorry about before.”

“It’s all right…. Actually, it’s not all right…. It was my fault for not hanging up the sign…. But it’s not all right… but it was my fault….”

She looked at Sorata with the accusing look while pouting.

“Could you do something about that face?”

“I was born like this.”

What did she dislike so much about his face?

“Aoyama’s upset because you didn’t make a move on her even after seeing her naked, Sorata.”

The one who approached them while yawning was Jin. He was probably getting sleepy as well, because he walked inside the bathroom first and the splashing sounds could be heard as he washed his face.

And when he was done, he wiped his face as he walked out and poured out

“But I guess it’s too much to ask a 16 year old single youth to take the main stage.”

Cruel comments like above.

“W-What do you mean, main stage! Mitaka-senpai, please don’t say those things!!”

“Then sex.”

“T-That’s even worse!”

Blushing up to her ears, Nanami retorted, but Jin paid no attention to it. “A boy in his teens is simple enough to fall for a girl who’s simply willing to hold his hand, so why don’t you start from that?”

Jin straightened his glasses, which he had taken off before.

“What are you saying! Also, I’m not that simple!”

“So he says. Aoyama, Sorata seems to be over himself, so I’ll leave the rest to you.”

Messing up the mood like that, Jin yawned again and walked into Sorata’s room, where they were debugging.

“Geez, that person is really… right, Aoyama?”

“…”

Aoyama was looking at her hand with a serious expression.

“He~y, Aoyama~.”

“W-What is it?”

Even after coming to her senses, Nanami avoided Sorata’s gaze.

“Are you all right?”

“Y-Yeah… I’m fine.”

Something wasn’t right.

“T-That’s right, it’s time to wake Mashiro up!”

“Ah, yeah. You’re right.”

“Now, hurry hurry!”

In the end, when Nanami urged him on, Sorata wasn't able to go into the bathroom and walked up the stairs to wake Mashiro up without washing off his humiliation.

The room placed at the centre of the second floor. Room 202 was Mashiro Shiina's room.

Standing before the door, Sorata knocked on the door.

"… No answer."

She must be fast asleep.

"I'm coming in."

No response came from the room again, so Sorata opened the door. As usual, an astonishing amount of clothes and underwear were scattered across the floor. Making sure that he isn't stepping on anything, Sorata made his way to the fascinating animal which was fast asleep under the desk and shook its shoulders.

"Shiina, wake up."

"… I'll let Sorata wake up."

"I've been awake for 48 hours already!"

Mashiro showed her puffy unsatisfied face. She crawled out from the space under the desk.

"It's morning. Hello."

"…"

Mashiro silently looked at Sorata.

"W-What?"

When Mashiro looked at him like that, Sorata's heart started to beat faster. After all, that did happen just a month ago… he was still thinking about what Mashiro said on the observation deck.

Although he wasn't able to hear what she had said after due to the sound of the

airplanes, nor did he ask her what she was going to say, he knew that Mashiro certainly was going to say「- Love」…. And being fully aware of that made it difficult for him to control his emotions.

Since he was already busy enough with the culture festival preparation, he was able to distract himself from the issue but in situations like these, he couldn't look at Mashiro's face properly.

While still troubled, Mashiro touched Sorata's cheek.

"It's Misaki's signature."

"Huh? How did you know?"

Mashiro extended her hand towards a piece of coloured paper on the desk. On it, there was a small handprint, and the name「Misaki Kamiigusa」was written on it. It was truly like her to do so.

"What's with that?"

"She gave it to me."

"… I see."

Well, let's not ask for the reason. There probably wasn't a significant reason for Misaki or Mashiro.

"Shiina, we have no time, so just hurry up and get changed."

He passed the uniform set to Mashiro. In a dazed state, Mashiro started to undo the pyjama buttons in front of Sorata.

"I don't mean get changed right now! … Not that you'll listen to me anyway!"

Sorata tried to act nonchalant and fled the room while sighing. Closing the door behind him, he leaned on it.

"Haaa…. How should I say this, this is quite hard on many levels."

A deep sigh escaped from him again.

Ignoring the immense pressure that he was feeling from his shoulders due to the lack of rest, he tried to summarise the things that he had to do that day.

Today was the fifth day of the culture festival. It was also a Sunday. The reason they chose that day to present Nyaboron was because there were going to be a lot of people since it was the weekend.

And the reason why they were only going to present it for a single day was because they haven't received permission from the school to participate.

"Well, it can't be helped…"

They had the chance to receive permission from their school. After all, Nanami did secure a proposal slot with the student council of both the high school and the university. However, due to some circumstances, they lost their only chance and Sorata wasn't able to give his proposal presentation.

Afterwards, Sorata bowed his head and begged for another chance, but they wouldn't listen to him.

"I guess I really shouldn't have said「Shut up! Keep your mouth shut!」to the president of the school council…"

As he was thinking these thoughts, Mashiro's room door opened from the inside.

"Oops."

Sorata quickly distanced himself from the door and turned around.

When Mashiro, wearing her school uniform, walked out of the room, she was holding a piece of thin cloth in both of her hands for some reason.

"What's with those?"

"They're panties."

"I can tell!"

"Which one do you prefer, Sorata?"

The one in her right hand was pure white with lacings on it which made it appear to be

neat yet sexy. The one in her left was pink that gave off a cute feeling, yet the shape of it made it appear to be erotic.

He'd already seen countless of Mashiro's panties over the last few months, but Sorata had never seen those two before.

"So, what are the panties meant to be?"

"Battle panties."

The atmosphere froze.

"…"

"…"

"What?"

"They're battle panties, Sorata."

It seemed like he wasn't hearing things.

"Why are you showing your battle panties to me today!"

"Today is an important day."

"What are you going to trying to do?!"

"…"

Mashiro glanced towards Sorata.

"D-Don't tell me…."

"Yes, that's right."

"Y-You're going to confess or something?"

Sorata blushed at his own words and looked away from Mashiro. The scene at the airport a month ago replayed itself in his head just like how it was in his dream.

"Today's the Nyaboron presentation day."

However, Mashiro's words were against his expectations.

"Huh? ... So, what was important was that?"

"Nyaboron is important."

"Well, yeah, that's true."

"So, battle panties."

"I get that we need to raise our spirits up for the presentation, but don't speak so ambiguously! And you're misunderstanding what battle panties are!"

"Panties that are worn on important days. That's what battle panties are."

"That's enough…. So, where did you get those panties?"

They seemed to be brand new. It didn't appear to be worn by anyone before.

"Rita gave them to me."

Mashiro turned her head and looked at a small parcel in her room. Now that Sorata thought about it, a parcel came yesterday from Rita- Mashiro's roommate back in England who stayed at Sakurasou about a month ago. The contents of the parcel must've been the battle panties.

To think that she would send something like that.

"Rita taught me."

"… About the battle panties?"

"Yes, she told me to wear it on important days."

"… I see."

Although he didn't know what exactly Rita was hoping for, but Mashiro probably wouldn't be able to figure out the true purpose of battle panties with her level of understanding.

"Sorata, which do you prefer?"

Mashiro appeared to be indifferent as she shoved the two panties into Sorata's face.

"But aren't you already wearing panties though?"

"I'm not."

"Why not?! You should've worn panties yesterday after showering! Did they disappear while you were sleeping? What kind of mystery is that!"

"They were taken off by my pyjamas."

"You mean you took them off!"

"You could say that."

"That's the only way to say it!"

"So, which one?"

"H-How should I choose your battle panties! And why are you asking me to choose!"

"Because Sorata always chooses them for me."

"You're making me sound like a pervert!"

"I'll wear the one that Sorata prefers."

"What does my preference have to do with it!"

"It's important."

"Then will you show them to me when you put it on?"

"What will you do when you see it?"

"I'm going to get hyped up!"

"Sorata's already hyped up."

"Whose fault do you think this is, hah!"

"Someone who's not me."

"No, it's your fault!"

As if she couldn't understand what Sorata was saying, Mashiro tilted her head to a side.

"Anyways, just choose one yourself."

Mashiro looked at the panties on the right for a while and turned her head to look at the other one in her left hand. Sorata expected her to choose one, but she simple threw both of them back into her room.

"I can't be bothered, so it's OK."

"I thought you might do that! Pink! Just wear the pink one!"

Sorata walked into Mashiro's room, picked up the pink one off the floor and handed it to Mashiro. He thought to himself 'Is it really OK for a guy to give battle panties to a girl?'….

"If you liked the pink one, you should've said so from the start."

"S-Shush!"

"Sorata, your face is red. Do you have a cold?"

As soon as she finished talking, she quickly touched Sorata's forehead with her own.

At the sudden close contact, Sorata backed off hurriedly.

"Sorata, you're hot."

"It's your fault!"

"Why?"

"Because, I-I'm! I'm a guy! And you're a girl! S-Shiina, you're too defenceless! What kinds of thoughts do you think will go through my head if you do something like that!"

He said more that what was necessary out of the excitement.

"What kinds?"

Mashiro asked blankly.

“Y-You don’t need to know!”

“Sorata, you’re weird.”

“… It’s understandable that anyone would go weird in a situation like this.”

Sorata whispered that to himself.

“Sorata is….”

“W-What?”

With his back turned on her, Sorata replied bluntly.

“Sorata is a guy.”

“…”

“I’m a girl?”

“I-Isn’t that obvious?”

“… Yeah.”

In the end, Sorata couldn’t see what expression Mashiro was wearing as she said that.

“Mashiro! We need to go to school!”

They heard Nanami’s voice from downstairs.

“Let’s go.”

“Y-Yeah.”

Part 2

After seeing Mashiro and Nanami off, Sorata head into the bathroom to wake himself up. He was able to wash off Misaki's handprint easily with some water, but his tiredness wasn't so easy to wash off.

When he was feeling slightly better, he returned to his room which was being used as the debugging room.

Sitting down next to Jin, Sorata watched the screen as the drama part was being created at great speed. The images were being stringed together to form flash animation and with the addition of slide movements, BGM and theme music, it was starting to have the real anime-like effects.

"Hey Sorata."

"Yes?"

"Today's the fifth day of the culture festival."

"I guess so."

"We couldn't participate a single day of it."

"I guess so."

"Hey, did you know that there was a beauty contest yesterday? And this year, it was held at the pool and the outfits were obviously swimsuits."

"I heard that a popular idol band done a live show at the gym on the opening day."

"The acting club from the university apparently held some girlfriend lending café thing. They pretend to be your girlfriend when you walk in. Asami invited me to go and have a look."

"The food venders from the shopping district were great as well from what I've heard. The Hashimoto Bakery showoffed their newest「The Greatest Melon Bread」as well."

"I want to go around the festival while eating. Yakisoba, okonomiyaki, takoyaki and

oden…. Apparently they have represented dishes from the individual districts."

"A~~ah, I really wanted to go to the special seminar yesterday. I could've listened to the game creator Kazuki Fujisawa who's an alumni of Suimei University of the Arts. …. The culture festival must've been really fun as well this year…."

"… Haa, too bad we don't have anything to do with it."

"That's right. We need to finish Nyaboron…. But let's stop talking about this, Jin-senpai. I'm about to cry!"

"OK, we'll refrain ourselves from talking about the culture festival."

Sorata and Jin continued to work on debugging the drama parts while talking about other things. They didn't take their eyes off the screen even for a moment.

"So, did something happen between you and Mashiro?"

At the unexpected question, Sorata coughed like crazy. He had to regain his breath.

"Something's not right between you two."

"Shiina is always like that."

"I'm talking about you."

"R-Really?"

"Hm~mm, something's not right."

"Not right?"

"Uh huh."

Even Ryuunosuke, who had been typing away at the keyboard wordlessly until now, piped in.

"To be precise, it feels like you're desperately trying to hide your feelings about Mashiro."

Jin was spot-on.

“If you can tell, then just leave me alone!”

“Can’t do that.”

“Why!”

“Don’t you think its fun to tease someone who’s worrying about these trivial matters?”

“Whoa~! Don’t analyse it like that!”

“And whenever I look at you, I really feel like doing something. So that’s why I’m calming that urge down by doing these things to you, got it?”

“T-Then don’t you feel shy around Misaki-senpai at all?”

“Being all shy whenever I looked at her face was a long time ago. There was even a period of time when I didn’t even talk to her. Must’ve been in my first year in middle school. I didn’t talk to her for nearly half a year, or at least, I didn’t try to talk to her first.”

Sorata expected Jin to avoid the question, but Jin answered more than he thought.

“And when I finally matured, Misaki was always by my side and the people around us noticed that. Since then, I just didn’t want to think of Misaki as a woman, sort of.”

“What does it feel like to be a childhood friend of hers?”

“I guess it’s a status that’s too distant because it’s too close…”

“That seems to be exaggerated.”

“It’s quite appropriate.”

Jin quietly laughed as if he was trying to hide his real thoughts.

“How should I know what I mean to Misaki. We’ve been together for this long. Misaki exists even in my longest memories. Even when I look at photo albums, no matter which page I turn to, there are always pictures of me and Misaki together… that’s who she is to me.”

“But she’s different to your family though.”

Jin did think of Misaki as someone of an opposite gender. The same could be said about Misaki as well.

“That’s why it’s so complicated.”

“We’re chatting a lot today.”

“Only because I think I might fall asleep if we don’t. Can I sleep?”

To wake himself up, Jin stood up and stretched his body.

“Of course you can’t. What are you saying.”

However, as soon as Sorata said that, Jin’s eyelids closed. After a second, Jin’s rhythmic breathing could be heard.

“Senpai, don’t sleep on your feet!”

Jin opened his eyes straight away.

“Hmm? Ah, sorry. Then I’ll take your offer and lay down to sleep.”

“What a positive way of thinking! But you can’t! If you lay on the bed, then you won’t be able to return!”

Jin showed no signs of listening and he lay down on the bed.

“I’ll leave the rest to you, Sorata.”

“No! We’re just getting started!”

“Not to worry, the fun part of the culture festival is the preparation, so I’ve already enjoyed the festival to the fullest. And Sorata, you were the one who told me not to sleep on my feet.”

“But I didn’t mean that you can sleep while laying down!”

“Hey, hey. Don’t be rude to your senior.”

“I’m at my limits since I’m tired as well. But we have no time.”

“Why don’t you use the same mentality to take down Mashiro?”

“I’ll say the same to you, senpai.”

“You’re letting me take down Mashiro?”

“I’m talking about Misaki-senpai!”

“How long do you plan to waste time with your girl talks.”

Ryuunosuke cut in again.

“But it’s the most important topic to us.”

With a cry, Jin lifted himself up.

“What about you, Ryuunosuke. How’s it going with Rita?”

“Please listen to me, senpai.”

“Hey, Sorata, I’m talking to Ryuunosuke now.”

“Akasaka made the Maid to reply to every single email that Rita sends. So the complaints end up with me!”

Rita’s emails were extremely formal, but when reading between the lines, the sentences emitted poisonous aurora. Sorata could imagine Rita typing heavily on the keyboards as she wrote the emails with a smile on her face…

“Tell her to be grateful that I’m not blacklisting her.”

“Why don’t you?”

“So that it doesn’t affect us with our productions. I’m being generous to her.”

As promised, Rita helped to develop the Nyaboron game. The illustrations for the drama parts that Sorata and Jin were looking over just now where drawn by Rita.

“Yeah, that’s very like you.”

“Hey, don’t you have anyone that you like, Ryuunosuke?”

“I don’t.”

“Then why don’t you just date Rita? It’s rare to meet a beauty like her. Her boobs are big as well.”

Sorata could agree with those points.

“I have no interest. I don’t like women.”

“I’ve wondered for a while, but do you have a reason to hate them, Akasaka?”

It probably wasn’t because he was vulnerable to women, and it was strange to hate women without a reason- enough to faint when one touches him at least.

“It’s got nothing to do with you, Kanda.”

“Is that so.”

“Then don’t you ever wish for a girlfriend?”

“I don’t.”

“Amazing. Sorata, you always wish for one, don’t you?”

“Well, as a healthy, male high school student, I do.”

“See, that’s what it means to be a normal male. Don’t you have any sexual urges, Ryuunosuke?”

“I can suppress it by eating tomatoes.”

“Tomatoes can’t do that much!”

“Enough of the chit-chat. It’s done.”

“What’s done….”

“Kanda, this is the last test play.”

“Okay, leave it to me!”

Part 3

The clock hands pointed to twelve o'clock.

The TV in Sorata's room displayed the word「The End」at the same time. It was the last scene of the ending roll.

"Kanda, was that enough?"

Looking stressed out due to the lack of sleep, Ryuunosuke asked him. Jin glanced at Sorata as well.

"Ahh, I think it's enough. It's finally complete…."

At that moment,

"Humph~, it's really done. Ah~ so tired~."

Jin yawned and stretched at the same time and lay down on the bed.

"Whew… that took a while."

Ryuunosuke sighed out of relief and achievement.

As Sorata basked himself in the freedom, he heard a sudden braking noise of a car. It was pretty close. It was probably right in front of Sakurasou.

"Misaki must've come to pick us up."

Bitterly smiling, Jin said 'there's not a moment to rest huh'.

Ryuunosuke already started to sleep in his chair.

"Wake up, Akasaka! We're going straight to school."

It was slightly over midday.

They were planning on using the theatre room, which was a shared facility with the university, and the only available spot was from half past 1- for exactly an hour.

The film club had the theatre booked before then, and the film studies club afterwards.

If they followed the correct steps to receive permission to participate in the festival, they could've booked the spot for sure, but unfortunately, the Sakurasou members were not allowed.

So they had to use that period to take over the theatre room, set up the equipments, and present it guerrilla-style all within the hour.

They had to rush to the rendezvous even a second earlier.

Everyone at Sakurasou should've understood that, but Ryuunosuke refused to get up from the chair.

"… Forget about me. I'll leave the rest to you, Kanda. You remember how to set up and operate the hardware right? Then there's no problem. You can do it, Kanda."

Since he used the hardware every single day since it arrived, Sorata knew how to use it perfectly well. However, he couldn't leave Ryuunosuke behind. Sorata felt that they had to do this together when they've come this far.

Sorata plugged out numerous cables from the hardware after turning it off and placed them in Ryuunosuke's hands.

"You're coming with us."

"First and foremost, what I need to do is to sleep. It's not ideal to kill off any more of my brain cells."

"Stop whining, and let's go!"

Holding Ryuunosuke by his arm, Sorata dragged him out of the room.

"Let me go, Kanda. The culture festival is a dangerous place that's infested with women. Are you planning to kill me?"

"Don't worry, I'll protect you."

"That sounds like something that everyone would like to say at least once in their lives, but say that to a woman."

Saying his honest thoughts, Jin cut in while lifting the small fridge sized hardware onto a trolley and proceeded to carry it out of the room.

“Hurry~!!”

Oh no, they could hear her voice.

“Get changed and meet up at the doorway.”

Jin went inside his own room.

“Understood. Akasaka, you should hurry up as well! I’ll strip you!”

Sorata threatened Ryuunosuke and started to pull at his T-shirt.

“S-Stop, I’ll do it myself.”

Blushing slightly, Ryuunosuke fled to his own room.

Sorata quickly took off his pants. As he changed into his school uniform, he checked to see if he left anything behind. The hardware, cables and the laptop were all packed up. All that remained was for the three of them to get ready.

Misaki beeped the horns to rush them.

“If you don’t come out now, I’ll go back to school!”

“We’re coming!”

As Sorata yelled and ran into the hallway, Jin and Ryuunosuke did the same. It didn’t take long for males to get changed.

“Then let’s go.”

“Yeah!”

Putting on his shoes, Sorata pushed the trolley and took the lead. Ryuunosuke followed behind him with an unsatisfied expression. Lastly, Jin walked out and locked the door behind him.

Misaki’s voice could be heard from the white mini-van in front of Sakurasou.

“Put the stuff in the back!”

Sorata folded the third row of seats and lifted the game hardware into the space with Ryuunosuke’s help. Throwing the trolley on top of it, Sorata and Ryuunosuke sat on the second row.

Jin followed behind and sat in the front passenger seat. As soon as he closed the door with a slam, Jin let out a strangled yell.

“What’s with your outfit…”

The vehicle started to race towards the school.

And Misaki, who was behind the wheels, was certainly wearing a ridiculous outfit.

“Isn’t it nice? I’m a rabbit woman!”

She was wearing a leotard that accentuated her figure, black tights and a pair of sexy high-heels. The outfit was complete with makeshift ears made out of a headband.

This was clearly a bunny girl, not a rabbit woman. “Really now….”

Exhausted, Jin took off his jacket and threw it around Misaki’s shoulders.

Their sights had now been cleansed.

“Senpai… what’s with the bunny girl?”

Since Jin sat at the front, Jin didn’t have anywhere else to avoid his gaze. The legs that were stepping on the accelerator were dangerous. If Jin lost his concentration, he would be sucked into the valleys of breasts.

“Every member of the Arts department are doing a forest themed exhibition! I’m one of the guides today.”

“That’s quite a provocative forest guide…”

“I… sometimes think that you’re too willing to help.”

“Who cares, it’s cute.”

Misaki didn’t seem to notice Jin’s worries.

“That’s the problem….”

Jin sighed.

“What should I do, Kohai-kun, Jin said that I’m cute.”

“Isn’t that nice.”

“Ughhh!”

Sorata decided to tell Jin this afterwards: ‘It looks like your worries will continue’. Not that it’ll cheer Jin up in any ways….

“That’s right. Mashiron’s acting as the guide on the last day, so make sure to check it

out Kohai-kun."

"What? Shiina will? Wait… s-she's going to wear that?!"

"Mashiro's costume will be a cat woman."

"That sounds somewhat fiendish, but I'm probably wrong right? You're talking like a bunny version of a cat right? Something like a kitty girl? Although, I'm not sure if the term actually exists."

"Get excited Kohai-kun! I saw Mashiron's costume at the dress fittings and she is uber cute! I got a runny nose from it!"

Shouldn't one normally get a bloody nose from something like that? That aside, did that mean that Mashiro was going to wear something that was on the same level as Misaki's outfit? If it's Mashiro, she would wear it without a care in the world. And she already wore it once at the dress fittings….

If that was the case, Sorata wanted to see it. However, Sorata didn't want anyone else to see something like that. He should warn Mashiro next time. But if she was enjoying it, she could say

"Sorata, you're annoying."

No, maybe it didn't matter if she said that to him. It would be better than other people seeing her in that outfit.

As Sorata was racking his already tired brain with these thoughts, Ryuunosuke came closer next to him. Ryuunosuke was breathing regularly with his eyes closed…

"I forgot I was sleepy. I want to sleep for a while, so please wake me up when we get there."

When Sorata yawned defencelessly, the van suddenly came to a halt at the red lights.

Both Sorata and Ryuunosuke banged their heads against the back of the seats in front of them.

"Drive safely! At this rate, I'll fall into an eternal sleep!"

Ryuunosuke said 'What is it, who's attacking us' as he groggily opened his eyes.

“It’s your fault for being sleepy Kohai-kun! Now then, drink this! Jin and Dragon as well!”

What Misaki handed to Sorata, Jin and Ryuunosuke were small bottles that were easy to grip in the hand. The label said「Full of nutrients! The last bottle you’ll ever need to get you over even death itself」on it.

“What’s this?”

When the lights turned green, the van started to race again.

“It’s a potion to recover your HP.”

“No, but it says that it’ll get you over even death itself? That sounds like a cheap catchphrase!”

Sorata looked to see what was inside the bottle, but he noticed the price first.

It was 2500 yen. [3]

“Expensive! What on earth are these?! Huh? Really?!”

“They’re my treat, so just drink it without complaining.”

“I don’t want to die yet, and if you’re treating us, then treat us to something better like beef!”

“Just drink it for now.”

Looking straight ahead, Jin drank it down in one gulp.

“W-Will it be OK?”

“The last time I had it, my body felt so light like I have wings on my back for the first three hours.”

Why did Jin’s smile seem to be so bitter?

“…. What happens after those three hours?”

“You’ll fall asleep like you’re dead!”

Misaki's bright smile could be seen on the mirror's reflection.

"We can wake up after we drink that right?!"

Well, if Jin drank it before and he's still alive, it should be fine.

Ryuunosuke nonchalantly drank the drink next to Sorata.

"Then should I try to go beyond death itself…?"

Twisting the cap open, the sweet smell of the contents ticked Sorata's nose. He brought the bottle to his lips. The sweetness grew stronger. Closing his eyes, he drank it down and it reminded him of the taste of cold syrups that he used to take when he was young. It didn't taste bad.

"How is it, Kohai-kun. Getting some strength?"

"I doubt it'll work straight awa…"

No, what? It may just be his feelings, but he thought his body became hotter.

"I'm full of strength for some reason!"

"That's the way, Kohai-kun!"

"I feel like I can respond to every one of your nonsensical remarks! I can do it!"

"What's terrifying about Misaki is that she can stay in this mode without taking one of these."

As expected of the alien. Their foundation itself was so different. So was she really a step ahead of them at all times…. No wonder no one can play along to her rhythm… Sorata could finally accept it.

While they were talking like that, their conversation suddenly stopped. Regathering his thoughts, Sorata noticed a change in his lower body. He was shivering. The empty bottle in his hand also shook as well.

He must've been nervous.

That was to be expected. For Sorata, 「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」 was his first notable

work. And he was going to present it to the people today.

“Will people come to watch it?”

They couldn’t advertise it out in the open because they had to avoid the festival organisers and the student council.

“Don’t fret, Kohai-kun! The Hashimoto Bakery owner told me that the shopping district was all excited for it when I went shopping yesterday. Also, I advertised it in a sneaky fashion, so don’t worry about that!”

“We need to worry about all the people that we won’t be able to fit inside the theatre.”

Ryuunosuke sounded quite frank.

“Akasaka…. What kind of a situation are you imagining?”

“A situation where we have to pack people inside like little seedlings.”

He had an expression that said ‘what else would there be’.

“You’re really amazing.”

“Consider our loyal development efforts. That’s only to be expected. It’ll be a full house for sure.”

“No, well yeah, but….”

“If you’re that worried, then should I spur something up?”

Taking out his smartphone, Ryuunosuke tapped it around with his skilful actions.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to leak information via the festival organiser’s SNS account. Don’t worry, I’ve made it so that the members won’t be able to prevent it.”

“What I’m worried about is you knowing the password for their account.”

“They had the worst security. It only took 5 minutes for Maid-chan to hack in.”

So the automatic response AI can now hack. How much further was she going to grow? Sorata was concerned that the AI might continue to grow and take over the world some day.

“I might as well plan out the seating arrangements then.”

Thanks to the immediate effects of the energy drink, Jin and Ryuunosuke were very energetic.

“Am I the only one who’s worried?”

Since Sorata was the only one of the three who has never showcased his own work before, that was to be expected.

“Ehh~ what’s wrong~? Kohai-kun, did you think that it was a boring game?”

“No, that’s not it.”

If he did, he wouldn’t have gone through all the trouble of getting the balance just right this morning.

He had a sense of self satisfaction to it.

“It’s not that I’m not confident about it… but there’s no guarantee that everyone who sees the work will enjoy it.”

“Well, that’s true.”

Jin agreed with him for the first time.

“I do think that the plot is great and the quality of the animation is superb. The same can be said about the battle sequence, but….”

“I also have those thoughts as well. But isn’t that what’s so fun about it? Isn’t it exiting? We can present the work that we’ve all been working on for the last two moths like ta-da! And people will see it. If you can’t say that this is fun, then what is?”

Right, so these shivers that Sorata has been feeling so far were exactly that…. It wasn’t just nervousness or worries. He was feeling excited as well.

“That’s right, Kohai-kun! We should enjoy it from here on!”

The car entered through the back of the school… originally the exits of the university, and headed towards the western gates.

The theatre room was just at west gates. The main entrance was full of people, so they didn't have anywhere to park their van.

"Whoa, what's with all these people…"

"I leaked out Kamiigusa-senpai's name among the information before. It's only to be expected."

"As expected of her…. Is all I can say."

"I guess so."

Unlike Jin, who agreed to Sorata, the person in question didn't show any reaction to it. Concentrating on driving, Misaki turned the van around and parked it in front of the gates that were off limits.

The four of them quickly hopped off the car. Ryuunosuke carried the game hardware on the trolley and went inside the trolley room via the back entrance.

Sorata was about to follow behind Ryuunosuke, but his feets stopped at the sight of all the people waiting around the main entrance. The crowd noticed Sorata's group at the back and they started to rush towards them.

"Jin-senpai, what should we do?"

"What do you mean… ah, found our helper."

"Huh? Helper?"

Jin was looking over the people and straight at someone who was trying to control the crowd.

"That's the school council president."

The president must've noticed Jin's gaze, because he turned around and looked towards Sorata and Jin.

“Mitaka! We didn’t permit Sakurasou members to participate in the culture festival! Stop it at once! I know you’re listening as well, Sorata Kanda!”

“Ehh, why does he remember my name?! And my full name at that!”

“Well~ it’s only natural for him to remember your name if you said something like 「Shut up! Keep your mouth shut!」 to him.”

“I suppose… that’s what it means to be a human. So, what are you going to do with this situation?”

“Obviously, we’ll do this.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, Jin breathed in deeply and shouted this at the overflowing amount of people.

“Please follow the student council president’s instructions if you are unable to go inside the theatre room!”

“Ah! Mitaka!”

The president’s face turned bright red in an instant. At the same time, the crowd started to ask the president on what to do.

“I’ll leave it to you, president~.”

Jin waved at the president of the student council. However, he probably wasn’t able to see Jin anyways. Paying no attention to it, Jin walked inside the theatre room, and Sorata followed behind. As Sorata locked the doors, he apologised to their student council president in his heart.

“… Senpai, you’re the devil.”

“Hmm? What? Isn’t it the committee’s job to maintain order at the culture festival? I only entrusted his own job to him- he should be grateful.”

“I can see why the president looked at you that way now.”

“I’m not happy that I’m loved by a man.”

“He totally hates you!”

“Then no problem. Now then, let’s go.”

In the audio and visual monitoring room, Ryuunosuke was setting everything up by himself.

“Anything that we can do to help?”

“It’s all good.”

Ryuunosuke returned his trustworthy reply.

“I’ll check out the main doors.”

Without waiting for an answer, Jin quickly went towards the entrance.

Left behind, Sorata took deep breaths and headed towards the backstage next to the main screens. The closer that he got towards his goal, his breath became louder and louder. He could sense things that he hasn’t sensed before.

Holding back his excitement, Sorata approached the short stairs and stepped up forcefully.

However, he couldn’t quite see the seats yet. He needed to go up three more steps… two more… one more…

He slowly looked around the theatre room.

People.

People were there.

He could feel the presence of nearly 300 people there. The chatters could be heard all the way on stage. Sorata could feel their anticipation for the「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」.

Thanks to the shopping district people making a way for the near-by primary school students, the front rows were filled with little customers and their eyes were lit up with excitement.

Some groups of students in Suimei High uniforms and university students came into Sorata’s view- some of them who he could recognise. There was a kindergartener

who brought his father along.

The place was packed.

Sorata's heart raced at the sight of the filled up seats.

But nothing has even started yet. So Sorata bit down on his lips to hold back his overflowing emotions.

"Sorata."

Inhaling deeply, Sorata turned around to see Mashiro behind him.

"… There are a lot of people."

"Yeah, it's so full."

"I'm so happy that I'm about to go mad."

"Yeah."

"But I'm glad that they were able to fill up every seat."

There weren't anyone in between the columns. That meant that every one of the 300 people was sitting down. Since it was going to be dangerous when people waves their hands and bodies around, the viewers were warned beforehand not to make exaggerated actions.

"Nanami helped out."

"Where is she?"

Mashiro turned her head and looked towards Nanami, who was trying to get into a rhythmic breathing. Her nervousness could be felt all the way to Sorata. That was because Nanami had an important job to do today.

Since「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」had a unique game-play, Nanami was going to stand on stage and lead the crowd through the game in an enjoyable way like a singer.

Originally, Sorata or Misaki were planning to do it, but Nanami volunteered for it three days ago, since she felt guilty for not contributing enough to the Nyaboron

project.

Sorata approached Nanami slowly.

“Aoyama.”

“Kanda.”

Nanami nodded her head. Her expression was frozen stiff.

“Even you get nervous?”

“Of course I do. I heard that even professionals get nervous during a live.”

“Then I guess it’s OK to be nervous.”

“Don’t say it like it’s not your problem.”

Nanami smiled as she said that.

“You seem to be cheerful today, Kanda.”

“Really?”

“Don’t tell me you’re feeling better because you stayed up all night or something.”

That phrase has already passed a long time ago. In fact, Sorata was about to die from the lack of sleep until some time ago.

“I’m surpassing my limits right now… my life will be over in two and a half hours though.”

“What are you saying?”

“Nothing, never mind.”

“You’re so weird.”

It seemed like Nanami was finally feeling slightly better. Her expression softened up.

“The hardware is all set up.”

Ryuunosuke came onto the backstage as he reported that.

“The place is good to go!”

Misaki approached them as well. Jin also came back after checking the entrance.

“How’re things outside?”

“The student council president has everything under control.”

“And his grudges grow stronger…”

“Well then, gather around everyone! Come together now, my magnificent comrades!”

“We’re already here.”

Sorata, Mashiro, Nanami, Misaki, Jin and Ryuunosuke hurdled in a circle.

Suddenly, Misaki extended her hand towards the circle.

Wordlessly, Jin placed his hand on top of Misaki’s. Nanami followed suit, and Sorata grabbed Mashiro’s hesitant hand along with his own. Lastly, Sorata forced Ryuunosuke’s unwilling hand on top.

“Now, we’ll hear a wonderful speech from Kohai-kun.”

“Ehh? Me?!”

“Well, Sorata is the director for now.”

Jin giggled.

“For now indeed….”

“We made the game according to Kanda directions. So if it flops, then it’s all Kanda’s fault.”

It was hard to tell how much of Ryuunosuke’s words were true.

“Wow~, don’t say those kinds of things now.”

“Whatever, just go Kanda.”

Nanami urged him on. Mashiro quietly waited for Sorata to speak.

With everyone's gaze fixed on him, Sorata left behind his embarrassed feelings and put all of his thoughts into his words.

"Please enjoy it for the next 30 minutes!"

Sakurasou resident members' reaction varied a lot.

Part 4

“Well then, here we go.”

At Nanami’s words, full of revolve, Sorata nodded strongly.

The lights in the theatre room turned off and the curtains onstage rose. As it did, the chatters in the crowd stopped as if it had been prepared before hand, and the crowd looked in anticipation.

Nanami stepped onto the stage, into the anticipation.

When she stood towards her designated spot towards the right hand side of the screen, the spotlight shone on her. Jin was controlling it from the monitor room.

Sorata and Mashiro were on standby next to the stage to keep an eye on the crowds’ reactions.

Nanami was explaining the game-play and some safety measures in a clear voice while acting out the actions with her body. The parts that the crowd were actually going to be part of were「Stand」,「Sit」,「Raising Both Hands In The Air」and「Clap」. The rest was just shouting out the name of Nyaboron’s final attack, so it was fairly simple.

They decided on these simple actions because 300 people were a lot of people and it could be dangerous if people started to jump up and down while waving their hands, even if the seats were spaced out as much as a normal multi-complex theatre, or even more.

Sorata actually wanted to add in some more actions, but Ryuunosuke stressed the safety issue and said that they should be more considerate towards the players.

“What will you do if someone gets injured?”

“…That’s… you’re right. Yeah, injuries are no good.”

As a result of that, they ended up with their current movements after recognising that Ryuunosuke was right.

Nanami warned the crowd to be aware of the people around them as the final instruction.

“Now then, please enjoy「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」.”

Nanami said in a cheerful voice and she bowed to the crowd.

The spotlight turned off and a low, deep sound that shook the ground started to play. On the screen, a visual of something large flying towards earth from outer-space was shown.

The visual was a static one, but thanks to the projectors and the small dust particles helped it to look like a video. The sound effects and the BGM helped it to come alive a lot.

The one who contributed the sounds was someone named Hauhau who was in charge of Misaki’s previous animation. Sorata has never met this person before, so he didn’t know what kind of person she was…

The falling object from space passed through the stratosphere and showed itself as it pierced the clouds of Tokyo sky. When the rows of tall skyscrapers came into view, one could see how big the falling object was. The height of it reached nearly 500 meters.

People looked up at the object from the ground. As soon as they saw what it was, their expression quickly turned into despair.

However, that was only for a moment as the object quickly done a turn in mid-air just before it landed and landed on its four legged attached by strong springs.

A sound effect similar to a volcano exploding surrounded the theatre. The ground screamed as it caved into the weight of the object and at the same time, the devastating shockwave flattened out the surrounding buildings into mountains of rubble.

The coastlines were being devoured by their own tidal waves and the floating dust clouds blocked out the sunlight. In the middle of the dust cloud, a cat shaped alien slowly raised its body up. Its front paw stepped on the Tokyo Tower and destroyed it, leaving no traces.

「What an unpleasant sight.」

One of the leaders of the Nyangolownians「Ein the Cat-back」let his presence be known.

A satellite camera zoomed on Ein. Tens of kilometres around him has turned into a wasteland.

The united force started to attack Ein with missiles.

Ein looked at the hundreds of missiles flying towards him and

「Nyaaaaaaaaaa!!」

He destroyed them all with a single cry.

What appeared next was a fleet of fighter jets. They fired numerous amounts of missiles, but they couldn't inflict damage onto Ein's gigantic figure. Ein's fur were slightly burnt, but it recovered itself quite shortly afterwards.

When Ein cried again, the fighter jets were obliterated.

The giant cat monster had immense power and presence.

Mashiro's drawings were impressive as expected. They could capture the viewer's heart. As a proof of that, the viewers were captivated by「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」. A primary school student in the front row forgot to eat his popcorn. Some university students in the middle rows had their eyes glued to the screen. People in the last rows were leaning forwards in their seats.

Their concentration was remarkable.

The scene changed to the introduction of the protagonist Nekoko. A town that was destroyed by Ein. Pillars of flame flew up here and there. It was like the world was coming to an end. Even the sky was dyed red. During a time like that, Nekoko held up her lifeless love of her life, Nekosuke.

「Nekosuke-san—!」

Nekoko's shoulders, arms and lips shook as she repeated Nekosuke's name over and over again. However, Nekosuke no longer said Nekoko's name. He didn't smile. He didn't pat her head. He didn't ask her why she was being like that. His eyes… didn't open.

「Nekosuke-san!」

Nekoko's spoke with her blocked nose. Nekoko's voice has been acted out by Nanami. This scene had to be redone numerous times at Nanami's request since she didn't find it to be satisfactory.

Sorata remembered it being hard to talk to Nanami when she finished recording the final take because she was teary and she couldn't talk.

In the rubble, Nekoko wiped her tears from her dirtied cheeks and stood up. And she stared at a far away mountain… that was the back of Ein. Nekoko clenched her shaking fist and droplets of blood flowed down as her nails dug into her hand.

Before Nekoko's eyes, the last hope of humanity- the cat robot「Nyaboron」landed next to her.

「Fine. If you need my anger, then I'll let you use it. But I swear to send every single one of those Nyangolownians to hell.」

As if Nyaboron was responding to Nekoko's resolve, its eyes lit up.

And at the same time, the title logo「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」came up on the centre of the screen.

The opening sequence wasn't long, but it was enough to capture the hearts of the crowd. Everyone gulped and waited for the next scene to start.

The explanations on how Nekoko and Nekosuke were loves and they were once married but Nekosuke divorced Nekoko- after his brother Nekochiki was killed by a Nyangolownian- to avenge him.

The game then explain about how the humanity had been preparing for the Nyangolownian attack by building the fighting robot Nyaboron.

Originally, Misaki already had enough plot of Nyaboron to create a 52 episode anime series. However, due to the lack of time, Jin summarised the story so that it can fit in a 30 minute show- up to the defeat of one of the 6 leaders:「Ein the Cat-back」.

While Sorata was amazed at the reaction of the crowd, he felt Nanami looking at him from the stage.

The first battle scene was coming up.

The first battle was just fighting Ein's subordinates. In a full game, it was the equivalent of a tutorial level.

The screen switched to a 3D scene. However, there was no inconsistency in the visuals when the scene changed. Using the newest technology to animate the scenes, Misaki and Ryuunosuke cooperated together to reduce the textures and smoothen out the images. They put in much effort so that the 3D images didn't look different to Mashiro's drawings.

The quality of it was so high; it was hard to tell if it was really 3D imagery when looking at a static shot. This was only possible because they delayed their deadline by a week, but their hard work paid off. This was the image quality that Misaki was aiming for.

Misaki was able to pull off something that was never been done before. Misaki's skills and abilities were undoubtedly good, but the idea of even attempting something that she's never done before was amazing. Over the last two months, Sorata realised that there were things in the world that cannot be overtaken by efforts alone.

It only made sense for Jin to be fired up when looking at Misaki. After all, he was the closest one to her.

The past two months has proved to be a valuable learning experience for Sorata.

On the screen, the fight between Nyaboron and Nyangolownians started.

In an empty field, a fight between Nyaboron and a Nyangolownian broke out. That meant that it was time to do a synced game play. Sorata wondered if the crowd would participate accordingly.

As Sorata gulped, the screen changed to display the words「Get ready to Stand」.

"One, two, let's go! Stand!"

As Nanami yelled towards the seats, 300 people stood up at the same time. Sorata quickly looked towards the Nyaboron on the screen. If the camera sensors recognised the crowd's movement, then Nyaboron should've blasted off its opponent.

However, the screen showed no reaction. The crowd's reaction was appropriate….

Sorata started to worry, thinking camera might be broken.

At that moment,

「Go and look around hell first!」

With Nekoko's yell, Nyaboron sent the Nyangolownian flying with a brain buster. A text telling people to raise their hand shortly followed.

Again, the people followed Nanami's actions and raised both of their hands up.

When they did, Nyaboron grabbed Nyangolownian's tail and started to spin it around.

The next instruction was to clap while they had their hands up in the air. On the screen, it displayed a clapping timing metre. Slowly, the icon started to blink faster. The thundering clapping sounds from the theatre grew faster along with the icon.

Nyaboron started to increase its spinning speed along with the raising rhythm.

And when the people put their hands down at the signal, Nyaboron let go of the Nyangolownian and sent it flying.

Now, it was time for the finishing move.

On the screen, the name of the finishing move came up. Nyaboron was gathering it's energy on the screen. The countdown for the finishing move started.

3…. 2…. 1….

「Meatball Beam!」

300 people yelled it out at the same time.

The atmosphere in the theatre shook, and Sorata could feel the pressure of the yells from the side of the stage.

Nyaboron held its front paws up and fired a jelly shaped beam. The Nyangolownian took the attack midair and exploded. It was gone without a trace.

Nyaboron defeated a Nyangolownian in an awesome manner.

Sorata was worried about how reactive the game was, but he thought that it should be

fine if it was at this level. The action processing speed was quite good, so things didn't slow down.

When Sorata looked towards the monitor room, his and Ryuunosuke's eyes met. Those eyes had a confident expression. It seems like Ryuunosuke wasn't worried about it at all.

When Nyaboron and Nekoko defeated the Nyangolownian, it was finally time to battle it off against「Ein the Cat-back」.

Nyaboron measured 333 meters in height, but Ein was much taller. Like shown at the start, a cat punch from Ein was enough for Nyaboron to be flown off to a neighbouring prefecture.

The fate of humanity really did depend on this fight.

The primary school students in the front row cheered for Nyaboron.

「Do you remember how many people you have killed?」

Nekoko asked Ein in a voice shaking with anger.

「I'm tired. You know, my shoulders hurt because they're always hunched like a cat's. Ah~ so tired.」

Misaki provided Ein's voice and it sounded all right. It was surprising how Misaki can be good at anything that she does.

「I wonder if I'll feel better if I bash you up? Ah, why don't I do that?」

Ein bashed up two of his near-by subordinates just because he was tired. At the cruel act, Nekoko finally snapped.

「You don't have the right to be alive!」

「I don't need you to understand me. Humans are tiny creatures that are worse than my poop, but they can entertain me. OK, that's it, get angry and come at me. Entertain me out of my tiredness. Now!」

Nyaboron blocked Ein's cat punch. However, a third of its body sank into the ground.

「Weak~, weak~ I'm telling you! You think you can take me on with something like that! Nyaaaaa!」

At Ein's terrifying yell, Nyaboron flew backwards.

Some people from the crowd naturally said "Nyaboron!" as it got knocked back.

For some reason, even Sorata clenched his fist.

Although it wasn't responding to the noises from the crowd, Nyaboron landed on its feet.

As soon as it did, the scene changed to a 3D battle one and the battle began.

This time, Nanami didn't need to show the actions.

At the signal on the screen, everyone stood up.

Ein used cat punch. On the screen, the Hand Up sign came up. When the crowd raised their hands, Nyaboron quickly avoided the attack. Ein didn't stop there and used its yell. This time, the crowd shouted 「Meatball Beam!」 and fired off the special attack.

「Is that all you've got! Entertain me!」

Becoming serious, Ein started to perform combos after combos onto Nyaboron. Cat punches flew to its left and right side and finally, a headbutt.

The cat punches were avoided thanks to the crowd movements, but the headbutt landed square on Nyaboron's head.

With that attack, Nyaboron's HP dropped to zero. This was a planned power balance. Sorata thought that it would be better if Nyaboron was to be defeated at least once.

On the screen, the instructions to revive Nyaboron came up- to clap and say the keyword. The BGM changed to something that was more befitting to the situation.

Like they were cheering for their favourite sports team, the crowd stood up and started to send their energy to Nyaboron.

Ein started to approach Nyaboron to land its final attack.

Nanami peeked at Sorata.

It was hard to tell if Nyaboron will revive on time.

If they lost now, then it would be a game over. Even if they continued, they had to beat Ein from the start. The Sakurasou members debated over this point, but Sorata felt that it would be pointless if it was a game that was a completely beatable game. So, he added the game over feature while trusting on his instinct.

He really did feel that a game that was easy wasn't that fun, and that one can't get the thrill of beating a hard game. Also, there wouldn't be a point to their interactive feature of the game.

The theme that Sorata was aiming for was「You can win even if you have failed once」.

They were at the crossroad now.

Sorata felt like that they wouldn't be able to make it by his experience with the test game plays. The cheers were out of beat. The claps were loud, but they weren't clapping to the right rhythm.

So the energy gauge was recovering slowly.

Ein was just in front of Nyaboron.

Grabbing Nyaboron's head, it picked Nyaboron up easily. And it lifted its arm to deliver the final cat punch.

No, it's too late. As soon as the thought went through Sorata's head, the energy recovery sped up. The final key word of "Nyaboron!" came just in time.

The screen froze for a moment. Then, the thrilling music stopped and silence crept upon them.

But suddenly, Nyaboron's eyes lit up with a sharp sound effect and a fast paced battle music started to play. It was impactful orchestra music recorded thanks to the university's music club. Also, it was complete with vocals that belonged to a student who was training to become an opera singer. The music pumped up your blood even if you didn't want to get excited.

Filled with the energy from the crowd, Nyaboron grabbed Ein's head with its arms and sent a knee kick to Ein's face.

Ein fell backwards while sporting a bloody nose. At a chance that would never appear again, the logo for the voice command appeared on the screen. The 300 people breathed deeply. And,

—Meatball Beam!

The beam hit Ein at zero distance.

「Nyaaaaaaaaaa!」

The painful yell echoed through the theatre. Misaki's acting was superb.

Down on its fours, Ein glared at Nyaboron in fury. And after focusing on its target, it opened its mouth and shout out an energy beam.

Nyaboron got into its position and shot out a beam as well.

However, Ein's beam was overpowering Nyaboron's and was pushing Nyaboron back.

On the screen, the clapping command and the key phrase came up again.

The crowd united once more and cheered on for Nyaboron.

Nekoko answered their cheers strongly.

「Mendoryaaaaaaaaaa!」

The Meatball Beam became stronger and pushed Ein's beam back.

Using the energy from the theatre room, Nyaboron overpowered Ein.

「How can this beeeeeeee! M-M-My bodyyyyyyyy!!」

And being swept up by the giant Meatball Beam, Ein was destroyed as it yelled and screamed.

Only Nyaboron remained in the chaos. The fast battle music faded out and a quiet sentimental one started to play.

Sunlight shone through the clouds and onto the messed up Nyaboron.

「Nekosuke-san, I avenged you.」

As Nekoko looked up at the sky and put on a bitter smile, the scene faded away and started to roll the credits.

Although the crowd didn't need to clap any more, their claps and cheers continued.

Someone shouted for encore. Some shouted that they wanted a sequel.

Being overwhelmed by the positive feedback, Sorata could only stand there in a daze.

Everyone was happy. They were clapping. Sorata was really happy about that. He felt that they done really well. All that he felt in his heart was his gratefulness to the viewers.

The crowd's clapping didn't stop even when the credits finished rolling and 「The End」 came up.

"Sorata, we did it."

Mashiro placed her hand on Sorata's clenched fist.

"Yeah… we're, awesome… I-I think I'm going to go crazy…"

"We did it Kanda!"

Nanami cheerfully ran down the stage.

"Yeah…. That was the best."

Swept up by his emotions, Sorata high-fived Nanami.

But he couldn't stay in that mood for long.

"Sorata, hurry up and pack up! The student council president brought the teachers!"

Jin's voice could be heard from behind the screen.

Looking at the monitor room, Sorata saw that Ryuunosuke already finished packing things up.

Although he didn't want to, Sorata grabbed Mashiro's hand and started to run.

Nanami ran past him. Jin helped Ryuunosuke to move the game hardware and Misaki had already ran outside. The van engine starting up could be heard.

When all of the members boarded the van, they set off while ignoring the yells from the teachers and the student council president behind them.

"We're the greatest in the universe!"

Swept up by Misaki's enthusiasm, Sorata also yelled that they were the greatest in the universe.

Sorata can't remember what happened afterwards.

But it felt like he dreamt the happiest dream that he's ever had. That was all that he could remember. But that was enough.

7th of November

The following were recorded on the Sakurasou meeting log.

— I declare this here! From today onwards, you will mark this date as the Nyaboron Day. Kohai-kun, Mashiron, Nanamin, Dragon, Jin, Ritan and Hauhau, thank you! I achieved my dream thanks to you guys! I can't sleep tonight! By- Misaki Kamiigusa

— Misaki-senpai, if you don't sleep, you might really die! By- Sorata Kanda.

— So let's hurry up and make Episode 2. By- Misaki Kamiigusa

— I don't want to die by overworking at this age, so please let me rest. By- Sorata Kanda.

— Umm, since when did this meeting log become an exchange diary? By- Nanami Aoyama.

Chapter 2 - Oh Autumn Days When Love Is Blooming Dizzily

Part 1

First, slightly tear open the tip of a cold banana.

“Hey, Akasaka.”

“I’ll allow you to talk. Continue.”

Secondly, stick in a chopstick into the opened tip of the banana.

“The Nyaboron show yesterday… no, on the day before, was a great success. We spent much of our time on making it and it was worth it to hold back on playing around at the culture festival… to do the final checks on the balances.”

“I didn’t plan on playing around at the culture festival, but I agree that Nyaboron was a great success.”

Thirdly, peel off the banana peel completely and shape it similarly to an ice candybar.

“The cheers and the claps… it was amazing. I think they’re still ringing in my ears.”

“Uh huh.”

“And that was on the fifth day of the culture festival.”

“On the day before yesterday. It was on the 7th of November.”

“That’s right, it was on the day before….”

“What are you trying to say, Kanda. I don’t have enough time to spend with you talking about how the time flies.”

Fourthly, holding the chopstick part firmly, pour the melted coating chocolate over the banana using a ladle.

The chocolate started to harden upon contact with the cold banana.

“Hence, we have the right to enjoy the remaining two days of culture festival since we worked so hard on Nyaboron. Since our culture festival does go for a whole week.”

“I recognise that you want to enjoy the school festival, Kanda. It’s difficult to understand it though.”

Fifthly, sprinkle colourful toppings onto the now-black banana. Then it’s finished.

“But isn’t it strange? Why is it the last day of the school festival when I woke up?! And it’s already past lunch time, and the culture festival will be over in a few hours! Then why do I have to work at this chocobanana café since the morning without resting!”

Sixthly, sell the finished chocobanana for 100 yen.

“Thank you for buying. Enjoy your time.”

While giving a business smile….

“We worked ourselves to the limit with the deadline of Nyaboron. So it’s not all that strange for us to sleep for 36 hours after finishing.”

“What I want to hear aren’t those types of words!”

“Then don’t ask me.”

“When I woke up, I saw the date and I thought the humanity has created the time machine.”

“That’s the sign of a person with a poor imagination. You better do something about it.”

“Shut up!”

“And why are you making such a big fuss over such a small thing like a culture festival?”

“What do you mean, small, what do you think a culture festival is!”

Sorata didn’t know what it was like in other schools, but at Suimei High, it was the most flamboyant event that everyone in the area looked forward to.

“Culture festival is just a break that doesn’t count as a lesson. A common word for it is a long weekend.”

“Don’t say it like it’s the Golden Week[4]!”

Sighing, Sorata looked around the classroom. It was quite busy during the lunch hours, but now, the number of customers decreased. There was just a group of 3 male students.

The words「Chocobanana Café」, made out of yellow drawing paper, were stuck onto the window in a way that the words can be read from the outside. The interior of the classroom was decorated with yellow and black cloth, and the tables were colour coded the same way.

Nanami, the person in charge of the classroom, asked Sorata for his opinions of the classroom that morning, so he answered,

“Why don’t we change the shop name to the「Tiger Café」?”

He answered as truthfully as he could, but Nanami stepped on his foot.

“You don’t know any good points about tigers, Kanda.”

When Nanami spoke in with a serious expression,

“I’ll learn more about them.”

Sorata avoided the fight with that response.

So, Sorata was making and selling chocobananas in that tiger striped classroom while dressed in black pants, yellow shirt and a black vest- coloured like a chocobanana himself.

Another person who was working in the shop, Ryuunosuke, was dressed in his school uniform and was doing something on his laptop while sitting at a table that he pulled over. He hasn’t made a single chocobanana and it seemed like he wasn’t going to either.

In reality, it has been Sorata who’d been looking after the shop that day.

“Akasaka, it would be OK if it’s even for a moment, but why don’t you swap shifts with me?”

“I refuse.”

“10 minutes! No, even 5 minutes would be fine! Please give me some time to make some memories of the school festival!”

“Nyaboron is more than enough. It would be impossible to make any memories that surpass that right now.”

“That’s true, but…”

If what Misaki said was true, then Mashiro should be dressed up as a cat woman at the「Forest Exhibition」… she should be a guide there while dressed up as a kitten girl.

If she really was dressed that way, then Sorata wanted to see it at least once.

“Anyways, please Akasaka!”

“I refuse.”

“Please.”

“Is it a woman?”

“I-If it is?”

“…”

Ryuunosuke wordlessly typed on the keyboard.

“Don’t ignore me now!”

“It’s too much for me to look after the shop.”

“Why!”

“Firstly, I don’t like to be friendly with people. A rude shopkeeper would dirty the business.”

“If you know what your problem is, then try to fix it!”

“Secondly, I don’t like chocobananas. Women eating chocobananas are even worse.”

“Please don’t let a customer hear that. Their glares would be pretty painful.”

Thankfully, there were no female customers in the class.

“Thirdly, I don’t even want to be the shopkeeper.”

“Let me tell you, I don’t want to either!”

“Hence, we can conclude that the only one who can be a shopkeeper is Kanda.”

“That’s quite a conclusion coming from you! So you really don’t want to do it!”

“If you know that, then that’s enough for me.”

Sorata didn’t know for sure, since he wasn’t keeping a count of it, but it seems like their tiredness hasn’t completely worn off yet. Akasaka has been yawning a number of times now. Sorata was the same as well….

“Hey, Akasaka~ can’t you dress like a waiter at least?”

“What for?”

“I look like an idiot wearing this by myself.”

“That’s not true, Kanda.”

Ryuunosuke looked up from his laptop screen.

“Huh? You mean it suits me? Or do I look cool?”

“You don’t 「look like an idiot」, you are an idiot.”

“Ah, is that so….”

Well, in Ryuunosuke’s case, it was amazing that he even came to school.

Even that morning, Sorata had to put in a lot of effort just to drag Ryuunosuke out of his room.

When Sorata spoke to him from outside his door,

“I don’t have to go to school if there are no lessons.”

Whining like that, Ryuunosuke refused to leave his room, room number 102.

Usually, Sorata would've gave up, but he didn't want to because without Ryuunosuke, Sorata would have to attend the shop by himself.

"I'll be lonely without you!"

"Kanda."

"Oh, you're coming out?"

"You need to go to a hospital, not the school. That actually makes me angry."

"Thanks for digging deeper into my wounds! I'll never forget it, you bastard!"

Afterwards, with Jin's help, Sorata was able to drag Ryuunosuke out of his room and brought him to school.

Since their job was decided by their class, one must do what he or she has been assigned to so that they can maintain a peaceful relationship with their classmates. For both Sorata or Ryuunosuke, the other students discriminated against them for living in Sakurasou, so they had to make the extra effort so that they don't cause trouble for their classmates.

When their three male customers left the classroom, Sorata sat down at the counter seat.

As Sorata took out his phone to check the time, Sorata remembered something.

"Akasaka, you'd better reply to Rita's mails."

"Don't worry. I'm replying back to her at the speed of light."

"Do it yourself, not via Maid-chan."

"Why should I waste my precious time on the former-freeloader?"

Ryuunosuke's hate of females was the same as ever.

"Why do you hate women so much?"

Ryuunosuke finally looked up from the laptop screen. He glanced at Sorata for a moment, but continued to type away at his keyboard.

"… It doesn't concern you."

It was unlike Ryuunosuke to answer like that, when he would usually give concise answers.

"It makes me even more curious hearing an answer like that."

"There are people who're here to buy some fruits that turn green to yellow when ripe that's easy to peel off which are enjoyed by monkeys that has been covered in hardened mix that has been created by using cocoa powder and sugar which has been sprinkled by various toppings that are enjoyed by children."

"Just say chocobanana!"

Sorata's conversation with Ryuunosuke was cut off and Sorata poured the chocolate onto the banana in front of the customer's eyes. Two girls who appeared to be in their first year said "Wow~," and "Looks delicious," cheerfully.

The two first years who received their chocobananas while smiling didn't go and sit down, but looked at Sorata's face like they still wanted to say something.

"Is there something on my face?"

"They probably want to point out your stupid expression."

Ignoring Ryuunosuke's rude comment, Sorata urged the two girls to talk and they said,

"U-Umm, N-Nyaboron… was cool."

"It was a lot of fun!"

The two of them told him what they thought about Nyaboron.

At the unexpected feedback, Sorata could only mumble,

"A-Ah… yeah, thanks."

And say the most appropriate response that came to his mind.

The two girls cheerfully 'kya'ed while they went to sit down at a corner of the classroom.

It was only then when Sorata felt like he was floating on the clouds. He started to lose his feelings from his toes, and he thought that we was up in the sky. Being lead by the raising emotion inside his heart,

"Woohoo~!"

Cheering loudly, Sorata clenched both of his hands in a fist.

If he didn't bite down on his lower lips, then his mouth would've hung down loose. What should he do…. He couldn't stop himself. He hasn't been happier in his 16 years of being alive.

"Kanda. It's unpleasant, so stop smirking."

"No, it's all right if I smirk right now! Aren't you happy?"

"Don't worry. I am very happy."

"…. You're really amazing then. Not showing an ounce of it on your expression."

But what was it. He could still feel someone looking at them. The two girls who complimented Nyaboron were looking that way.

Could they be Sorata's fans now? There's no way. No girl has ever been like that in his entire life. But just because of Nyaboron, could he become…. While Sorata was thinking about these stupid thoughts, he realised that the girls were actually looking at Ryuunosuke.

If he kept his mouth shut…. No, if one didn't know about Ryuunosuke's personality, he was a fairly handsome guy, so it wasn't rare to see some girls who liked Ryuunosuke. In some situations, Ryuunosuke even attracted males' attention.

"Actually, we were in the middle of our conversation weren't we…. So why do you hate women, Akasaka?"

Knowing that the two girls were listening in, Sorata asked the same question again to Ryuunosuke.

"It doesn't concern you."

Ryuunosuke replied exactly as the same before.

“It’s such a waste.”

Sorata’s comment was ignored.

If Ryuunosuke wanted to keep quiet, then it couldn’t be helped.

Opening his phone, he sent a mail to Ryuunosuke. Since Ryuunosuke was busy working, Maid-chan should reply.

— Why do Akasaka hate women?

As expected, Maid-chan instantly replied.

— There’s a reason that is as high as the Mount Everest and as deep as the Mariana Trench.

— And what’s that?

— This took place before Ryuunosuke-sama met Sorata-sama… that’s right. It was during his middle school days.

— Hoo.

— Ryuunosuke-sama had two very close friends.

From the start, the story was unbelievable.

— One was called Kotaro-sama. He was a guy. The other was called Akemi-sama. She was a girl.

It seemed like they were getting to the main part.

— Ryuunosuke-sama, Kotaro-sama and Akemi-sama done everything together, and they were very, very close friends.

— So, so?

— One day, Ryuunosuke-sama fell in love. He had fallen for Akemi-sama. However, Ryuunosuke-sama then found out. That Akemi-sama held feelings for Kotaro-sama…

Sorata expected this to happen.

— While that was happening, Ryuunosuke-sama happened to hear about how Kotaro-sama was feeling. That Kotaro-sama had someone that he liked and that he was still wondering about it. Hearing that, Ryuunosuke-sama realised that Kotaro-sama liked Akemi-sama as well. So, Ryuunosuke decided to bite the bullet and let his two friends date each other.

— Maid-chan, this story is related to how Ryuunosuke started to hate women right?

— It was on Christmas Eve.

— Maid-chan, I think you like to ignore me sometimes, but are you doing that on purpose?

— Of course I am. (Smile)

— You choose to reply to that!

— The important part is starting, so please attention. Otherwise, I'll send something like viruses. Tsk tsk!

— When you say 'something like viruses' you really do mean viruses! And it's doesn't sound cute at all when you do the tsk tsk thing!

— That Christmas Eve night, something happened.

— Are you ignoring me!

— Ryuunosuke-sama decided to provide a space for Kotaro-sama and Akemi-sama, so he decided not to go to a Christmas party that the three of them had planned. He hoped that his friends would confess to each other and become a couple as he spent the cold evening by himself.

— Hoo.

— However, for some reason, Akemi-san came to find Ryuunosuke-sama. She was out of breath as well…

Could she have realised that she actually liked Ryuunosuke instead? Did Ryuunosuke develop a hatred of women after he dated Akemi but things didn't work out in the end?

— When Akemi-sama saw Ryuunosuke-sama, she slapped his cheek with all her

might.

— What?

— And twice at that.

— W-Why?!

— Because the one who Kotaro-sama actually liked was Ryuunosuke-sama. When Akemi-sama found out, she cursed at Ryuunosuke-sama「You thieving cat! No, a thieving dragon!」. Afterwards, this event scared Ryuunosuke-sama for life.

— I-I see.

— And so, Ryuunosuke-sama developed hatred towards women since then…. Ta-da.

So, Ryuunosuke liked Akemi, Akemi liked Kotaro and Kotaro liked Ryuunosuke- it was a true love triangle.

— Afterwards, Ryuunosuke-sama has decided that he has no need for any other living women, so he created me.

— That was beyond what I've thought.

— All of that just now was just a story that I made up, so it would be troublesome if you actually believed me. Not that I think you would believe me anyway. (Lol)

— Hold on!

— There's no way I would go and babble on about Ryuunosuke's secret. Anyhow, Sorata-sama's IQ must be lower than a monkey's. You Mr Monkey!

— You just called me a Mr Monkey as like you would call a Mr Idiot, didn't you!

It was so cruel. No, how could Maid-chan play along like this…. How much more can Maid-chan evolve.

"Kanda, you feel better now?"

"Were you monitoring that all!"

"Of course I was. Did you forget that you were sending the mails to me?"

“No, well, that’s true… no, that’s not it. Just reply to Rita.”

“Maid-chan is doing that already.”

“There’s no point if you don’t do it.”

“Why?”

“Because she would be happier if you’re the one sending the replies.”

“Kanda, why do I have to make an effort to please the former freeloader?”

“Dating aside, and likes and dislikes aside, you could at least say「Good work with the Nyaboron drawings」. You were happy with the drawings that she done right?”

In fact, none of Rita’s drawings were rejected. It was as expected of an artist. When Rita returned to England, she picked up drawing again.

“I see, your point is taken.”

Accepting Sorata’s proposal, Ryuunosuke opened up the mail software.

Quickly typing on the keyboard, he sent the mail on the spot. Looking at the sentence,

— Good work. I congratulate you.

Was written.

“Why are you being like that…”

The time difference between Japan and England was nine hours. Since it would be early morning in England, Rita should check Ryuunosuke’s mail quite soon. Sorata knew that Rita would send her complaints to him.

While he was talking to Ryuunosuke like that, two new customers came in. Both of them were wearing Suimei High uniforms…. No, they were people that Sorata knew quite well.

“Welcome… oh, it’s you Aoyama. And Miyahara as well.”

The one who was with Nanami was Daichi Miyahara from the class next door. Being on the swimming club, he was well toned and he was fairly tall- giving off a hard-to-

approach impression. However, he was childish unlike his looks, so Sorata knew that he was quite easy to approach. Sorata knew this since he shared a room with Daichi last year, from April to July- for three months. When Sorata brought in the white cat Hikari, Daichi didn't mind at all, and he even helped Sorata to look after the cat. He was one of Sorata's only friends who didn't discriminate him after he moved to Sakurasou.

"Yo Kanda."

"What, Miyahara."

Daichi twisted his big body around and showed the「Culture Festival Committee」tag on his left arm proudly.

"Miyahara… didn't you say that you never wanted to be on the committee for the culture festival even if you died?"

"Huh? Really? But he said that he really wanted to do it, you know?"

Nanami made a puzzled face.

"What are you saying, I really wanted to do it."

Keyboard clacking sounds came from behind the sceptical Sorata.

"Akasaka is skipping out as usual."

Nanami's eyes tuned into slits as she looked at Ryuunosuke. She was like a hawk looking at its prey. Nanami walked into the counter and towards Ryuunosuke. On her way to Ryuunosuke, she grabbed a large cloth from a box.

"Kanda, get the Ponytail out of here. She gives me the chills."

"There's something that I would like to say, and that's to tell you that I have the word impossible in my vocabulary."

"Akasaka, if you're not going to do anything, you can do so while wearing this uniform."

What Nanami held in her hands was a waitress uniform that had a lot of frills and laces. Apparently, the girls in their class stayed up all night to make this from scratch.

It was quite well done- considering that it was done by beginners.

“Your face is already a joke, so you don’t need to push yourself.”

“W-Whose face is a joke!”

“Yours.”

“W-What!”

“Don’t fight again! People are creatures that can endure right!”

Sorata desperately tried to stop the fight. Daichi looked at the situation without doing anything. It seemed like he was just going to let them be.

“Ponytail, if you’re going to suggest something, then you better think about the consequences first. Because unfortunately, if I wear that fluttery dress, I’ll be much, much prettier than you.”

“What!”

Nanami’s expression froze.

“It creeps me out to even think about it, but Kanda’s focus will be all on me. Now tell me, would you be fine with that?”

“K-Kanda has nothing to do with it.”

Nanami slightly blushed.

“Do you really think that I’ll fall for you!”

Ignoring Sorata, Ryuunosuke closed his laptop lid and stood up and said

“Since Ponytail is here, I don’t need to be on duty.”

As he did, left the counter.

“Ah, damn it Akasaka, don’t run away!”

But Ryuunosuke wouldn’t stop just because Sorata told him to. Without turning back, he left the room smoothly.

“Aoyama… Akasaka left…”

“Sorata’s an idiot.”

“Ehh?! Why?!”

“I’m just taking out my anger on you.”

“Don’t say it so boldly!”

Next to them, Daichi laughed out loud. His laughs almost sounded like giggles.

“I think this all the time, but you guys are too funny.”

Daichi finally joined the conversation.

“Oi, oi, what do you mean, all the time.”

“You guys are like this in your class aren’t you? Kanda, Akasaka and Aoyama trio.”

“Don’t make it sound like a group!”

“Don’t count me in it!”

Sorata and Nanami’s complaints overlapped each other. What if the other classroom heard them.…

“Your timings are perfect as well.”

And Daichi continued to laugh.

“Miyahara, you’re laughing too much!”

When they glared at Daichi, he seemed like he understood. However, he was still trying to stop his laughter, because his back was still shaking from the suppressed laughter.

“Kanda, it’s your fault.”

“Could you please tell me the reason.”

“I don’t know.”

Nanami turned her head and looked away. Daichi laughed again.

Without thinking, Sorata looked at the waitress uniform in Nanami's hand.

"Did you wear that as well, Aoyama?"

"Huh? Ah, yeah…. I wore it, but why do you ask?"

Since they lived in the same dorm, Sorata has seen Nanami wearing her casual clothes all the time, but he'd never seen her wear something as fluttery as this.

"No, I just wanted to see how you look in a dress like this."

"What?!"

"Then I have a photo of her from yesterday."

Daichi held up the digital camera around his neck.

"W-Why did you take a photo of it?!"

"Well, that's because it's part of the committee's job to take photos of all the memories."

"Show me."

Before Sorata could even reach out his arms,

"No!"

Nanami snatched the digital camera from Daichi's hand.

"Sometimes, I feel like I'm being rejected by Nanami, but I wonder why?"

"I-It's not like I'm rejecting you…"

"You're not?"

"I-If you want to see it, t-then I'm going to wear it anyway…."

"Huh?"

"N-Nothing! I'm not wearing this because I want to show it to you, but because I'm going to take over the shop duty for just an hour. You haven't looked around the festival at all, have you?"

"Oh, really?! You're the best Aoyama! You're the only one who's on my side!"

Excited, Sorata grabbed Nanami's hands and shook it up and down.

"Y-You don't need to be that happy."

"Ah, s-sorry."

"Y-you don't need to apologise over something like this…."

Pulling her hands away, Nanami looked away like there was something that was still on her mind.

"I'm so happy that you're taking on my shift, but it'll be hard to manage by yourself."

"Don't worry about that. I'll be helping her as well."

The one who was stupid enough to say that was Daichi. He had already changed into the waiter clothes while Sorata and Nanami were talking. It suited him since he was a lot taller than Sorata.

"Don't worry about it, Miyahara. We're in different classes."

"No, just think of it as a committee member's duty. You know how a store must be managed by at least two people? We need to abide by the rules. Isn't that right?"

Daichi placed his hand on Sorata's shoulders as if he was asking for Sorata's support. He knew Nanami's weaknesses well.

"Uuu, even if you say that…."

"Then it's decided that Aoyama and I will look after the shop."

"Thanks, Miyahara! You're a life saviour. You too, Aoyama!"

Sorata shook Daichi's hand energetically to show his thanks.

"It pains me when you thank me this much."

“Why?”

“Because I have ulterior motives.”

Saying that, Daichi looked towards the curtained off area that Nanami went into to get changed.

So when Nanami poked her head out, their eyes met.

“Don’t peek.”

“O-Of course I won’t.”

Taken back, Sorata turned away. Daichi also looked away in a strange fashion.

With their backs on the curtain, they heard the curtain close again. Soon after, the sounds of rustling as Nanami changed her clothes could be heard.

Anyhow, Daichi said that he had other ulterior motives just now. Also, he was on the culture festival committee even when he said that he didn’t want to do it at all. This was almost like….

As Sorata was deep in thought, he was interrupted by Nanami’s voice.

“Oh yeah, Kanda.”

“I didn’t steal and eat any.”

“… I’m not suspecting you of that.”

“Then what is it?”

“You know, it’s about Mitaka-senpai and Kamiigusa-senpai…”

Saying that, Nanami opened the curtains.

“You can look now.”

Sorata and Daichi turned around towards Nanami at the same time.

The yellow and black coloured waitress uniform was round around the shoulders and the skirt, but it was thin around the waist- the design accentuated the womanly charms.

And since it was Nanami who was wearing it, not only did she look cute, her modest looks went extremely well together with the clothes.

With his mouth wide open, Sorata forgot to even compliment her on the clothes.

“Kanda, you have your mouth side open like an idiot.”

“U-Umm, it’s like Aoyama is Aoyama, but isn’t Aoyama.”

“I wish that you would make sense when you’re complimenting me….”

Aoyama glared at him.

“… Looks good.”

“That’s it?”

“Looks very good.”

Then Nanami turned around and quietly cheered for herself, while clenching her fist.

Daichi wore a troubled expression next to the two, but neither Sorata nor Nanami realised.

“Ah, so Aoyama. What were you saying about Jin-senpai and Misaki-senpai?”

Looking at Sorata again, Nanami signed Sorata to come closer. When Sorata bent down and put his ears closer to Nanami, she came close up to him. Reading the mood, Daichi quickly went to wipe down the tables.

“Did… something happen between Mitaka-senpai and Kamiigusa-senpai?”

“Something?”

“… I saw them on my way here.”

“Saw what?”

“The two of them linking arms while walking.”

“What?!”

“They looked… like a couple.”

“Really? I didn’t hear anything about it. Are you sure it was them?”

Nanami thought for a moment.

“I did see them from afar… but I doubt that I mistook other people for them.”

“True.”

“So I thought you might know something, Kanda. Since you’re close to Kamiigusa-senpai as well.”

“I’m just trying my hardest to be on a friendly term with the alien for the future of humanity.”

“Sorry… for saying something like this so suddenly.”

Sorata was slightly taken back by the news, since he thought that it was going to be that simple. However, he was sure that it was a good news. It must mean that Jin finally made up his mind. Maybe Jin finally found out a way to be on par with Misaki’s blinding talents.

So if Jin and Misaki could be together, then nothing else would be better than that.

Thinking that, Sorata left the classroom leaving everything to Nanami and Daichi in an uplifted mood.

Part 2

Sorata has already decided on where to go from the start.

It was the art classroom where the「Forest Exhibition」was being held by the Arts students.

While walking rapidly in the hallway, he noticed a lot of people looking at him. He must've been attracting a lot of attention.

When Sorata saw his reflection on the windows, he finally realised that he was still in his waiter uniform. He considered if he should go back and get changed. However, he would have to wear the uniform again after an hour. Deciding that it was unimportant, Sorata enjoyed the attention that he was getting and headed to the art classroom.

He went up the stairs and walked towards the long hallway. At the end of that hallway was Sorata's destination, the art classroom that was in a separate building from the normal classrooms.

Was Mashiro really there? Was she really in a kitten girl outfit? His heart full of expectation and concern, Sorata crossed the hallway and arrived at the art classroom.

He was able to spot Mashiro straight away.

At the entry, Mashiro sat down holding a poster that said「Forest Exhibition Amongst Other Things」in a kitten girl outfit.

"T-This is?!"

Wondering what these 'other things' were, Sorata's sight was fixed on Mashiro.

However, it was very different from what Sorata imagined. Mashiro had cat paws on her hands, but she wasn't wearing a glove. She had cat ears, but she wasn't wearing a headband. She had a collar with a bell on it, but it wasn't naughty at all. She wasn't showing a lot of skin either.

Then what was it? To describe it in a phrase, it was a cat shaped doll costume. The only reason Sorata recognised that it was Mashiro was because she was showing her

cute face through the cat costume's wide open mouth. It looked like the cat was biting onto Mashiro's head. That itself was so cute, but Sorata couldn't hide his disappointment.

"… What are you doing?"

Mashiro looked up at Sorata while holding up the poster.

"Welcome. This is the 「Forest Exhibition Amongst Other Things」."

"Like I said, what are you doing?"

"Welcome. This is the 「Forest Exhibition Amongst Other Things」."

"Are you some kind of a NPC[5]!"

"I'm a poster girl."

"I think you're misusing the term. And why are you putting on a proud face?"

"What are you supposed to be Sorata?"

Mashiro scanned Sorata from the top of his head to his feet and back up to the head again.

"Our class is doing a chocobanana café. I'm a waiter there."

When Sorata explained it clearly, Mashiro stared at Sorata. Being embarrassed, Sorata looked away.

In Mashiro's eyes, it held the power to make one loose his cool. And even though Sorata has gotten accustomed to the stare, his well built up defences was now powerless after the event at the Narita Airport's observation deck.

And with the Nyaboron project complete, Sorata couldn't distribute his thoughts elsewhere.

Every movement that Mashiro made dug into Sorata deeply.

Even looking at her eye to eye was unbearable for Sorata.

“Umm…. You….”

“…”

Mashiro didn’t say anything.

“A-After you said goodbye to Rita, what did you…”

“Like.”

“What?!”

Sorata literally jumped up and showed his surprise with his whole body.

“That look.”

“… Huh?”

Before Sorata could feel happy, he felt the depression first.

“Sorata, cute.”

“…. Is that so.”

Why couldn’t Mashiro say that he looked cool or something.

While Sorata was being seriously depressed, Misaki jumped out from the art room. She must’ve heard Sorata from inside the room. Misaki was wearing a bear outfit similar to Mashiro’s.

“Oh~! Kohai-kun, long time no see!”

Greeting him cheerfully, Misaki gave him a bear knuckle. Sorata, who was standing defencelessly, had his left cheek smacked strongly.

“Umm, senpai, I got a que…”

“I got it, Kohai-kun! I’ll let you take a look inside in apology! Hey, one person coming in~!”

At Misaki’s rough action like she was catching a salmon, Sorata was dragged into the forest exhibition. Obviously, Sorata’s questions were ignored. Ditching her work as

the poster girl, Mashiro followed behind them.

“Can you just leave like that?”

“I’m sick of being a poster girl, so it’s OK.”

“It’s because of people like you they blame the young workers!”

“Mashiron, it’s OK since it’s time for a roster change anyway~!”

“Then say that in the first place!”

Handling both Mashiro and Misaki at the same time was too much for an Earthling to handle. Since the idea of a kitten girl has already been dumped out the window, there was no reason for Sorata to stay here.

As he was thinking that, he smelt something that made him feel hungry. A stomach grumbled. However, it came from Mashiro.

“Don’t take away my stomach’s chance of screen time!”

“It’s too early for you.”

“Don’t be so proud of it! And if you’re a girl, try to deny it even for a little bit! If it was Aoyama, she would’ve at least said「T-That wasn’t me」.”

No, she might not do that. But when a similar thing happened before, she did try to deny it.

“That wasn’t me.”

“It’s too late now.”

Sorata looked around the art room as he was led by the smell. It was quite different to what he’d imagined when he heard the word forest exhibition.

The whole classroom was decorated like a forest and there were artworks on the wall, but there were tables and chairs set up around the classroom, and the customers were eating omelette rice. The arts students were all dressed up in similar costumes like Misaki and Mashiro, and were serving the customers. At this point, it would be better to call this a cosplay café instead of a forest exhibition.

Where did they get all these costumes from? There were more than ten sets in total. It was quite a sight.

“While discussing what to do, the first years wanted an「exhibition」, the second years wanted a「fancy cafe」and the third years wanted「portraits」so we couldn’t come to a single conclusion. Also, I wanted「forest」,「omelette rice」and「doll costumes」so we mixed all of that together!”

“Each year level came to a single choice, but how come you got three choices on your own!”

It seems like the entire arts classes was equivalent to Misaki by herself. Sorata wanted to ignore this and pretend not to know.

“So, we decided to hold a「Forest Exhibition Amongst Other Things」this year!”

“The other things take up the majority of the classroom though!”

Sorata sat down at a seat Misaki led him to. For some reason, Mashiro sat in front of him. Sitting down face to face with a doll made him feel so distant from his common sense. Mashiro’s expressionless face spurred that on even further.

Misaki went to the kitchen area and quickly came back holding a plate of omelette rice. The dish was giving off a delicious aroma as it gave off steam before Sorata's eyes.

“So I get the exhibition, café, omelette rice, forest and the doll costumes, but what about the portraits?”

“Choose someone that you like. Nomination time!”

“Eh?! What nomination?”

“The most popular one is me!”

“Can someone answer my questions!”

Looking at a table next to his, Sorata saw a panda doll wearing student drawing something with the ketchup on the omelette rice. It was a portrait. On the other tables, a rabbit and a lion were drawing portraits skilfully with the ketchup.

Sorata understood what was going on. He had to choose someone who would draw his portrait.

“I’ll draw you.”

Without waiting for a response, Mashiro grabbed the ketchup.

“Kohai-kun, who do you choose between us!”

Misaki pushed her face close to Sorata. They were close enough to kiss.

“Misaki-senpai! You’re too close!”

Holding the bear head with both of his hands, Sorata pushed Misaki back.

“There’s no need for distances between us, Kohai-kun!”

Misaki wasn’t backing off.

It would be for the best if he made a decision now. It was embarrassing enough to have people in the café looking at them and Mashiro’s expressionless stare was nothing to laugh at either.

Sorata thought that Mashiro could squirt the ketchup at him… and she really did.

Sorata took the attack head on, and his nose was dyed red. Misaki finally let go of him as she tried to avoid the ketchup.

“Are you trying to draw a portrait on my face, Shiina! How revolutionary!”

“I’m not.”

“Then what was that for! I was surprised!”

Sorata wiped the ketchup with a tissue.

“I was angry.”

“Don’t you think you’re being too aggressive lately! Are you reflecting on it?”

“No.”

“Well then, do it!”

Sorata said this every single time, but Mashiro was really hard to understand.

“No, never mind. And if you really want to draw, then you can draw the portrait.”

“You’re dumping me, Kohai-kun! When we’ve lived together for over an year!”

“The cold glares that I’m getting is troublesome, so please don’t say anything more that’s unnecessary, Misaki-senpai!”

“You better remember this, because I’m going to be nice to you when we get back! We’ll be together till the morning~!”

Throwing a large bomb even till the end, Misaki went to the other customers to take their orders while shouting ‘yahooo~’. She was really a storm. She was a natural disaster[6] that was like a hurricane or a tornado. She was a genius[7] though…

Wordlessly, Mashiro started to draw Sorata’s portrait on the omelette rice. She had a serious look in her eyes. Her hand movements were very smooth like she was working with a brush and she continued to draw on the omelette rice without even looking at Sorata’s face.

Not even a minute has passed when Mashiro finished Sorata’s portrait. A true genius doesn’t seem to be contained by the types of tools available to him or her.

“It’s done.”

The quality was unbelievably high. It didn’t look like it was drawn with ketchup at all. It didn’t look like it was drawn on omelette rice at all. It was like the portrait was alive. Like as if Sorata was actually on the omelette rice…

“Ah… it’s really done. So I’m eating this artwork! It puts me off!”

“It’s OK.”

“What is?!”

“There is cannibalism.”

“Are you trying to annoy me!”

On the customer who asked Misaki to draw the portrait, a cute character was smiling on the omelette rice.

“It’s really well done.”

Mashiro looked down at the omelette rice with an unsatisfied expression.

“That’s why I don’t feel like eating!”

“If you’re not going to eat.”

Sorata need to be a lot more hungrier to eat this.

“I’ll eat Sorata.”

At Mashiro’s words, the people around them went “Huh?!” and “What?!” in surprise.

“Choose your words carefully! That sounds like something’s being done to me!”

“Something? What?”

“T-That’s….”

Sorata imagined himself being forced by Mashiro and he quickly shut his mouth.

“Whoa~, what am I thinking!”

Sorata shook his head to get those thoughts out of his head.

Unable to resist Mashiro’s look again, Sorata scooped up the omelette rice and shovelled it down his stomach.

In an instant, the dish was empty and when Sorata drank some water and sighed, Misaki returned to the table.

“So, your stomach was charmed by the omelette rice that I made, Kohai-kun!”

Sorata thought that it was delicious, and his assumption turned out to be true. The person who was the best at cooking was Jin, but after him was Misaki.

“Stomach?”

“That’s right, Mashiron! There are three important checks in a lover’s relationship.”

“You mean married life! Perseverance, paycheck and mother.”

Mashiro must’ve never heard of this term before, because she tilted her head in puzzlement.

“No, Kohai-kun! For lovers, it should be stomach! Gloves! And…kin”

“Whoa~! Don’t say that!”

“Purse?”

[8]

“Oh, you know it very well~ Mashiron! So it’s important to capture the stomach first!”

Although it was a precious break that Nanami provided for him, being there wasn’t much of a break. It took a toll on his stamina and his mental strength. Since he was finished with the omelette rice, he thought that he should retreat.

“Thanks for the food.”

He payed for the food to Misaki and stood up. Sorata tried to leave the art room before he ends up in more trouble.

But for some reason, Mashiro followed behind him and grabbed his belt at the door.

“W-What is it, Shiina?”

“I’m done for today.”

“Ah, right.”

“Yes.”

“Good work.”

“…”

“Eh~ umm.…”

"…"

"S-Should we look around together?"

"Yes."

Mashiro nodded her large doll head.

And thinking that he'd have to wait for Mashiro to get changed, he went outside the class to wait for her. But again, Mashiro followed him.

"Are you going to follow me around in that?"

"Yes."

"Don't agree to it like that!"

"Is it weird somewhere?"

"It's weird overall!"

"But it's cute."

"Whatever, just go and get changed. Other people are looking!"

Unwillingly, Mashiro took off the head first. And she turned her back towards Sorata so that he can undo the zipper.

As requested by Mashiro, Sorata pulled the zipper down to the shoulders when he quickly stopped. He saw pale and pretty back. The shoulder bones formed a gentle line as well. Thinking why she was naked underneath, Sorata redone the zipper.

And he pushed the doll head over her head.

"Is there something wrong?"

"There's something wrong with you!"

"You're so mean."

"Why are you wearing the cat shell in your birthday suit?"

“There’s no problem.”

“What? Why not?!”

“Because I’ve got panties on.”

“Panties doesn’t have enough power to solve everything!”

“I believe in them.”

“Don’t believe in them! And what about the top? Why don’t you have anything on there?”

“Top?”

“I’m talking about your chest!”

“They recently grew bigger.”

“W-Who told you to tell me something like that! …. But really?”

Mashiro nodded her head.

“The size is a secret.”

“You should’ve kept the previous info a secret as well! I think something will happen to my head!”

“Sorata’s always angry. You’re not nice to me at all.”

“I think I’m really nice to you?!”

“So you’re in your weary stage.”

“Aren’t you trying to say rebellious stage instead?”

“Some say that.”

“That’s the only way to say it! And when you say weary stage…. Are we some kind of a couple or something!”

“I don’t like that part about Sorata.”

“Why do I need to listen to things that a comedian in decline would hear?”

“Because now is important.”

“That arrogant attitude pisses me off!”

“It doesn’t for me.”

“Let’s stop… let’s just stop. Whatever, just go and wear your uniform.”

Then Mashiro extended her hands to Sorata like she wanted something.

“What’s this supposed to mean?”

“Clothes.”

“Where’s your uniform!”

“Don’t have it.”

“… Hmm?”

“Don’t have it.”

“What are you saying? Did you lose it?”

“I didn’t bring it.”

What does it mean when someone is at school, but doesn’t have a uniform? For example, there were some students in the sports clubs who came to school and went home in their sports uniform. There were a few students who Sorata has never seen in their normal uniform. Was Mashiro being like them?

“… How did you come to school?”

Sorata asked carefully to tackle the root of the problem.

“By walking.”

“Not that!”

“I came with Misaki.”

“In what?”

“This.”

Saying that, Mashiro did a little twirl, as if she was saying ‘how do I look?’

“… So you came to school dressed up as a doll?”

“Yes.”

“You’re incredible! Are you able to do anything!”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m starting to think that I’m the weird one now!”

Sorata didn’t go to school together with Mashiro since he had to be the shop keeper at the classroom. But that was his mistake. No, leaving Mashiro to Misaki had been a mistake in itself.

“Sorata?”

“What is it?”

“Take it off?”

“Please stay that way.”

Losing all strength to say anything, Sorata walked around the culture festival in his waiter uniform, and Mashiro in her cat doll costume.

“Ah, I forgot to ask Misaki-senpai about Jin-senpai…. Well, I’ll ask her later.”

Part 3

This was something that he could only dream of last year.

To go around the culture festival together with a girl….

Sorata had decided to make it a reality next year as he watched couples after couples in envy.

And that has now become a reality.

Sorata was now slowly walking down the main street of the university campus while eating some snacks bought at the street vendors with the cutest girl.

They lined up at a takoyaki[9] shop because the girl wanted some, Sorata went to an okonomiyaki[10] shop to buy some because the girl wanted some and when she said that she wanted some yakisoba[11], Sorata had to check his wallet.

And now, they were trying to find a place to seat after buying some taiyaki[12]

The savoury smell of the taiyaki radiated from the paper bag that it was in. As Sorata was enjoying that, he felt a sudden warmth around his right hand.

“W-What is it?!”

Surprised, he looked at his right hand to find Mashiro holding onto his hand. It was a fluffy doll hand.

“So that Sorata doesn’t get lost.”

“You’re the one who’s likely to get lost!”

“It’s good to be honest.”

“I’m not trying to act tough!!”

His voice was breaking only because he was nervous.

"…."

"W-What, why did you go quiet?"

"For some reason."

"For some reason, what?"

"I wanted to hold it."

"… Uuu!"

Since Mashiro was always stone-faced and spoke in a nonchalant tone, Sorata found it hard to tell Mashiro meant and wanted to crouch down while wrapping his arms around his head. However, since he held the taiyaki and Mashiro's hand in each of his hands, he couldn't do that and subconsciously started to take heavier steps.

His heart started to beat faster, so he was starting to get out of breath.

The reality of spending time together with a girl at the culture festival was very different from what Sorata had expected, so he couldn't enjoy himself to the fullest.

It was all because of the large cat which was swaying as it walked next to him.

"Why do I have to have a doll next to…."

"Sorata was the one who asked me to."

"That was because this was the only choice!"

Sorata understood that it was too late to complain about it now. Although he knew, couldn't God allow him to spend the day at the culture festival with a normal girl?

At this rate, Sorata really did look like her master.

"Sorata, I'm tired."

"That's because you're wearing that!"

Sitting Mashiro down at a log bench nearby, Sorata sat next to her as well. He handed the bought taiyaki to Mashiro.

“It’s hot, so be careful.”

Mashiro wordlessly bit at the head of the taiyaki. The scene looked funny since it went well nicely together with Mashiro’s cat costume. Laughing weakly, Sorata brought his own share of taiyaki to his mouth.

Cold wind blew past their legs. By November, the signs of winter became stronger and the hot steaming summer starts to be missed.

Peoples’ conversation as they walked by drifted into Sorata’s ears and he could hear a trumpet playing as it attracted people to a street vendor. He wondered if the person who was playing the trumpet was majoring in that instrument.

When the song finished, clapping noise started and when that finished, all that remained were the sounds of people chatting.

Sorata savoured the last bit of the taiyaki’s tail and he swallowed it down. Mashiro was still eating. While nibbling with her small mouth….

“Hey, Shiina…. What… did you say after you said goodbye to Rita?”

Not being able to look at Mashiro’s face directly, Sorata looked straight ahead.

This time, he asked the question properly.

However, Mashiro did not reply.

With enough wariness to walk on a thin layer of ice, Sorata slowly turned his head.

But when he did, for some reason, Mashiro’s face was just in front of his. They were around 10 centimetres apart. And she was coming even closer. Naturally, Sorata’s gaze focused on Mashiro’s lips. And without making a sound, Sorata closed his eyes by reflex.

Straight away, Mashiro licked the tip of Sorata’s lips.

Sorata pulled himself up and rolled off the bench.

“W-What! What are you doing!”

“You had azuki bean paste on you.”

“I thought my soul was going to come out!”

“If it comes out, then it’ll come back.”

“How?!”

“With arm strength.”

“Don’t try to be so trusting of your arm strength! And if I had azuki bean paste on me, then tell me so that I can wipe it myself! A-And if you want to wipe it for me, then you have your hand! Your hand!”

“I can’t use my cat hand.”

“Who told you to make a joke, now!”

“I’m busy enough holding a taiyaki.”

She held up the taiyaki that she held with both of her hands like it was something precious.

“Be more aware about these things! And don’t try to play with me like this any more!”

Without caring about how Sorata felt at all, Mashiro held up her half eaten taiyaki and asked,

“Do you want to eat it?”

“Don’t do that as soon as I finish talking.”

Sorata was extremely tired, but he sat back down on the bench. Leaving a considerable amount of space between him and Mashiro…

“I only do that to Sorata.”

“Hey!”

Mashiro didn’t really mean anything, but Sorata’s face quickly reddened at her words. When he started to feel that he was blushing, his heart shock and his heart beat even faster. He started to sweat from every part of his body and he couldn’t say anything sensible right now.

Holding the taiyaki, Mashiro was close enough to touch Sorata's shoulders. Her eyes told him that she wanted him to eat it.

Thinking that he wouldn't be able to deal with it for much longer, Sorata wordlessly ate the taiyaki that Mashiro held out. He couldn't really tell if the cooled down taiyaki tasted good or not, but Sorata quickly chewed and gulped it down.

As he did, he could feel Mashiro's gaze on him.

"Stomach, did I get it?"

"What?"

Because of Misaki's careless babbles, Mashiro learnt something weird again.

"You know… you capture a man's stomach with the food that you make. No matter how delicious this taiyaki is, it's no good since you didn't make it, Shiina. If my stomach gets captured by this, then my heart will be stolen by the taiyaki shop owner!"

It was like this all the time, but Mashiro was too spontaneous.

What was she going to do when she captures Sorata's stomach?

And although his stomach wasn't captured by Mashiro, it felt like something that's even more precious was captured by her. Of course, Sorata wasn't going to say that.

"Cooking…."

Mashiro whispered the cursed word, but since Sorata didn't want to dig his own grave, he didn't say anything.

They weren't really having a conversation, but they just sat on the bench side by side. It was very different to how Sorata imagined it to be, but Sorata didn't think that this was all that bad.

He was also depressed that Mashiro ignored his question about the Narita Airport incident. It really was hard to ask the question multiple times. At this stage, he felt that he couldn't ask the question again for a while. He mustered up a lot of courage to ask Mashiro, but he was reaching his patience limits….

Suddenly, he felt someone near him. On a bench around 2 meters next to the one that he

was sitting on, a man sat down. The man appeared to be in his thirties. Wearing jeans and a casual parker, he was looking at the flow of people walking by with a nostalgic expression.

It felt like Sorata has met that person before.

Noticing Sorata's gaze, the man slowly turned his head.

When their eyes met, Sorata exclaimed.

"Ah!"

Mashiro looked at him in puzzlement.

This was the second time that Sorata met this person face to face.

"Huh, I think I've seen you somewhere before…"

The other man seemed to remember Sorata as well.

"Kazuki Fujisawa… -san."

They've met approximately two months ago. It was at the game audition presentation round. Kazuki Fujisawa was one of the judges who sat in front of Sorata.

"Ah, that's right… I've seen you at the Let's Make A Game presentation."

"Ah, yes. Do you remember every one of the presenters?"

"No, I remembered because a high school student presenter is quite rare. But I see, you were a Suimei High student. So you're my junior."

Kazuki smiled happily.

"Is that cute cat next to you your girlfriend? I feel jealous."

Sorata looked at Mashiro.

And he instantly said,

"She's not!"

After letting Kazuki know, he whispered,

“Don’t say something like master!”

Into her ear.

Mashiro nodded in understanding and after thinking for a bit she said,

“Sorata is indebted to me.”

And she bowed to Kazuki.

“Ah~, what are you saying!”

“You’re not?”

“Of course not! If you’re talking about indebted, then you’re the one who’s indebted to me.”

“You seem to be quite different to how you were at your presentation.”

Kazuki smiled like it was interesting. Embarrassed, Sorata closed his mouth. He made Mashiro promise him not to say anything stupid.

“Why are you at school, Fujisawa-san?”

Sorata knew that Kazuki came to the culture festival to give a special lecture, but that was three days ago- on Saturday. Sorata remembered it well, since he wanted to go, but had to finish Nyaboron.

“There’s going to be a small talk after the closing event in the university cafeteria. My professor for Media invited me saying ‘You must attend’ so I couldn’t refuse him. Since I was able to graduate thanks to him.”

Kazuki had a nostalgic expression, so Sorata could feel a kindness that he couldn’t describe.

He felt that he also wanted to smile like that some day.

“So what happened since then? Are you continuously attempting the competition?”

“I have submitted a game design each month, but…”

While he was working on Nyaboron, Sorata submitted an entry for both September and October. In September, he submitted a rhythm action battle game that showcased flamboyant graphics. For the October entry, he submitted a game where one 'grows' an earth in a networked system. He was confident with both of these entries, but he was rejected. The reply said,

— We hope that you understand that your entry was unsuccessful this time.

In a formal business like form.

Sorata expected his entries to pass the first round at least, since his first entry in August was able to reach the presentation stage, but when he receive the letter, he could come to terms with the reality for a few days.

He even started to prepare for presentations thinking that he was going to pass the first round.

"I know that it might be silly to say this myself, but the competition is very strict."

Kazuki tried to cheer Sorata up.

"I submitted a lot of entries during my student days. Someone told me that it's impossible to get ahead of people by spending the same amount of effort as them. So from that point on, I decided to come up with an idea every day."

"An idea… every day?!"

"Of course, most of them were just weak ideas that either imitated or expanded on already existing games. I scrapped 90% of the ideas myself, but I sent the remaining 10% to the Let's Make A Game competition."

So that meant that only one entry out of many others was acknowledged and became a game….

If a game creator who was producing hits even till this day was trying this hard, Sorata felt that he should do better. It wasn't enough to submit an entry once a month. Now wasn't the time to be put off by doing an entry a week either.

He couldn't forget that there were other people who were trying harder than him. He drew a line even after watching Mashiro, Misaki and Ryuunosuke work tirelessly on Nyaboron.

The line, thinking ‘this is good enough’, was a starting point and going beyond that starting point would be putting in effort.

Didn’t Mashiro teach that to him?

“Back then, I was just happy to submit those entries. So I continued to submit them like an idiot.”

“What about… now?”

“Working is fun. But I sometimes feel bored since I’m accustomed to a lot of things.”

“… I’m not sure if I follow you.”

“Ha ha, it would be bad if you actually did. You’re still a young student. But….”

“Yes?”

“I see that you’re not asking me.”

“What?”

“About how to become a creator.”

“Ah, I’m sorry.”

“It’s not something that you need to apologise for. Even when people ask, I don’t answer that question. It was quite troublesome on Saturday, because people asked me that question so many times.”

“Why don’t you answer it?”

“It’s not like I’m trying to tease anyone…. But I think that the urge to make or create something isn’t something that can be taught by someone else. Of course, I can teach people on how to present and how to do some balance tweaks, but I wouldn’t know what they actually want to do.”

“I… see.”

“And normally, the people who do things for themselves are those who have the urge to do something. Like you.”

"No, I'm just…"

He only started because he didn't want to be left behind by his friends around him, who were striving to do something for themselves. Now, he's just being dragged along by Mashiro's creativeness, Misaki's enthusiasm and Nanami's continuous efforts.

So that's why he couldn't rely on them forever. He had to find his own pace, and with his own feet, he had to be able to rely on himself.

Right now, he was just riding on top of a wave of efforts that his friends made. He wanted to become someone who's able to create that wave himself.

"Including myself, there's just one thing that is common between every single creators."

"What's that?"

"We don't give up halfway through.… Even if our aims and goals are different, we all share that quality."

"… Not giving up."

"And we need to have our own tricks to be able to continue without giving up."

"Tricks?"

Sorata couldn't think of what those tricks could be no matter how much he thought about it.

"It's to make smaller goals and focus on them while having a bigger goal. For example, making checkpoints in 3 months, half a year, one year or 3 years distance, you can create a path to your bigger goal. And the sense of accomplishment will be greater each time you complete your checkpoint. Also, people tend to be more organised when they have a set goal. I think you'll be able to manage your schedule well. It may sound like I'm just rambling though…"

Kazuki awkwardly laughed as he said that.

"Ah, it sort of turned into a lecture. Sorry about that."

Sorata shook his head strongly and denied it.

“No, thank you for your great advices.”

“That’s great. Ah, that’s right. It’s a different matter, but do you know a teacher named Chihiro Sengoku? She’s in charge of arts at Suimei High.”

The name that Kazuki mentioned was so unexpected that Sorata was unable to respond straight away.

Instead, Mashiro quietly replied.

“We know, we live together at Sakurasou.”

“What a surprise. So you two are not only my school juniors, but Sakurasou juniors as well?”

Kazuki showed a bitter smile.

“What? Fujisawa-san also lived in Sakurasou?”

“Ha ha, I was young back then. I used to sneak into the university and steal things. Anyways, to think that that diligent Sengoku is the supervisor at Sakurasou.…”

“Eh? Diligent?”

That phrase didn’t fit Chihiro that Sorata knew at all. Maybe it was a different person of the same name. No, but it wasn’t a common name.

“Umm, Fujisawa-san and Sengoku-sensei were…”

“Classmates… I suppose. She was my crush during my school days.”

“What?!”

Even Mashiro opened her mouth next to the surprised Sorata.

“Ha ha, how embarrassing.”

The world is so small. But to think that that Chihiro…

“OK. Then could you do me a favour?”

“Ah, yes. What is it?”

Kazuki took out a business card and wrote down his phone number on the back and handed it to Sorata.

“Please pass it on to Sengoku.”

“Should I get her right now?”

Sorata took out his phone from his pocket as he said that.

“Thank you for the offer, but it’s all right. She wouldn’t want to see me anyway.”

“She would probably rip that card as well, but don’t worry about it. It’s just her last ditch fight.”

It seemed like he still liked Chihiro…. If so, it might be better if he didn’t see her. Since Chihiro has developed in ways that may be against his imagination.

He would feel so betrayed when he finds out that the diligent Chihiro was now a lazy person, and she was still arguing that she was 29 years and 22 months old while wearing thick make-up when she went out on meetings…. Memories are best kept while they’re still beautiful. No, maybe it would be better if Sorata showed him the reality and let him wake up from his dreams.

Before Sorata could come to a decision, Kazuki said goodbye and stood up.

“I’ve got somewhere that I need to go, so please excuse me.”

“I was glad to hear your advices. Thank you.”

Kazuki lightly waved at Sorata’s thanks and disappeared through the crowd.

“Anyways, that Chihiro-sensei… diligent?”

It was really unbelievable.

“Sorata…”

“What is it?”

“Big problem.”

“What, why?”

Finished with the taiyaki, Mashiro sat with her legs crossed.

“Toilet?”

She nodded.

“Then hurry up and go!”

“I can’t go by myself. I can’t take it off.”

Mashiro reached for her back, but she couldn’t reach the zipper.

“Arggh~! How did you deal with it until now!”

Realising how serious the problem was, Sorata shouted.

“Because Misaki was with me.”

Anyhow, they headed to the toilet.

Sorata held Mashiro’s hand and lead her to the closest building- the Arts building.

Almost skipping through the corridor, they arrived in front of the girls toilet.

But the problem started there.

“Sorata, come here.”

Without hesitation, Mashiro tugged at Sorata.

“Wait, wait! Are you trying to turn me into a criminal?”

A few students looked at them from afar with looks that said, “What, are they fighting?”

Sorata couldn’t go inside the girls toilet. As a man… no, as a human being.

However, all that Mashiro was wearing underneath the doll costume was panties. He couldn’t undo the zipper outside the toilet.

While Sorata and Mashiro were quarrelling in front of the girls toilets, they gained a

lot of attention from the students around them.

“N-Nothing’s going on.”

Sorata put on a dry smile and desperately tried to hide it.

“A-Anyways, this place is no good! Follow me!”

They had to find a toilet that not much people used. For now, they had to go to the second floor. Pulling Mashiro’s hand, they went upstairs. Since that floor wasn’t open during the culture festival, because it was used as work space for the university students, the number of people quickly decreased.

Over here should be fine.

In front of the girls toilet, Sorata took off the head of Mashiro’s costume and went inside the toilet together with her after checking no-one was inside. By the entrance, Sorata pulled the zipper down to Mashiro’s back. She should be able to do the rest by herself now.

When Mashiro entered a cubicle and closed the door, Sorata sneaked out of the girls toilet making sure that he wasn’t sighted.

“Whew~, that was close.”

As soon as he sighed in relief, someone placed their hand on Sorata’s shoulder.

“Heek!”

“So you have these kinds of hobbies?”

Turing around, Sorata saw Chihiro Sengoku, the art teacher who was also living in Sakurasou, standing there. As usual, she was wearing thick make-up around her eyes that gave off a lot of power as she desperately tried to hide her age.

“Oh, it’s only you… thank god~.”

His relief only lasted for a moment, because Chihiro took out her phone and pressed three buttons. There were the number for the police「1」,「1」and「0」.

“Why are you trying to report me!”

“I’m just doing my duty as a good citizen.”

“Don’t try to do your duty when you don’t even keep any other duties as a citizen!”

“What are you saying, you enemy of women.”

“I’m not! It’s because of Shiina.”

“What’s that? Is that a spell to make your sins disappear?”

“The root of this problem is you giving me all responsibilities for Shiina!”

At that moment, Mashiro came out from the toilet.

“…”

She didn’t really say anything when she saw Chihiro’s face. The two of them were cousins, but they were distant, maybe because of their difference in age. Or, it could be that Mashiro’s just cool….

“Sorata, here.”

Sorata zipped up Mashiro’s zipper when she turned around.

“Sensei, what are you doing here?”

“So you’re doing an animal play.”

Ignoring Sorata, Chihiro looked at the doll-like Mashiro.

“Please try to talk like an educator.”

Suddenly, a sweet voice interrupted them.

“Chihiro~, don’t leave me behind~.”

The one approaching the three from a distance away was the Modern Japanese language teacher- Koharu Shiroyama. She must’ve been friends with Chihiro since their high school days, because the pair were often seen together.

“Huh, it’s Kanda and Shiina. You can’t~. Don’t try to breed in a place like this just because you’re excited about the culture festival.”

“What are you saying, Koharu-sensei!”

“We’re patrolling this area for any students who are doing weird things in these unused classrooms during the culture festival.”

“… Really?”

Sorata asked Chihiro to reconfirm it.

“Really. Geez, our work load increase because of you guys. If you’re trying to do something, then distinguish the place.”

“Geez, you need to distinguish your words!”

It was hard to tell if Mashiro understood or not, because she was just blinking wordlessly.

“Oh yeah, sensei.”

Remembering Kazuki, Sorata took out the business card that he placed in his wallet and gave it to Chihiro.

“I was told to give this to you.”

With a questioning expression, Chihiro took the card. As soon as she checked the card, her eyebrows twitched. For a moment, her expression softened, but it quickly became darker.

“Where did you meet him?”

“At the benches by the street.”

“Wasn’t that the place where Kazuki confessed to Chihiro before the university graduation?”

Kazuki must’ve been reminiscing the past. If so, Sorata must’ve bothered him.

“Don’t say anything unnecessary, Koharu. And don’t look into it either, Kanda.”

“I won’t. Fujisawa-san said that he’ll be at the university cafeteria after the closing event, so you could probably meet him there…”

Sorata chose his words carefully while checking for any changes on Chihiro's expression.

"Ah, OK. Then I have to avoid the cafeteria at all costs."

Saying that, Chihiro ripped Kazuki's business card into pieces and threw them in the bin next to the toilet.

"… Just like what Fujisawa-san said."

"What."

"No, he just said that you would rip it up."

"That's Kazuki for you. He knows Chihiro too well."

Koharu teasingly tapped Chihiro's shoulder.

Chihiro poked Koharu's palm. Hard in enough to produce a dull and poking noise.

"Ouch~!"

That yell probably wasn't an act, but one of pain. Koharu was withering in pain with tears in her eyes.

"Chihiro isn't so honest."

"You keep your mouth shut."

"Even though you actually want to meet Kazuki."

"I told you to keep your mouth shut."

But Koharu wasn't backing down.

"You had the chance to meet him at the summer reunion. But you were absent. Kazuki's fairly manly now."

"I'm not interested in guys who only tries to meet me… only for reunions and for work."

"But what you just said, isn't that just saying that you're trying not to meet him?"

“Why you”

“You guys looked well together before, so why don’t you stop being so stubborn?”

“Koharu, if you say anything more than that, I’ll shove a piping hot taiyaki in your mouth.”

Saying that, Chihiro walked away.

“Anyways… isn’t she being uncute, acting like a child and not being honest?”

Koharu asked for support with her eyes.

“Yeah….”

Sorata could only answer like that.

Chihiro turned at the corner of the corridor and disappeared out of sight.

“When Chihiro was still a student, all she ever done was drawing.”

“But why are you talking about her past so naturally!”

“Don’t you want to hear about her love story?”

He would be lying if he said no. However, he felt bad listening about it when the person in question wasn’t there. Also, didn’t Koharu need to work?

While Sorata was thinking that, Mashiro answered straight away.

“I do.”

“As expected of Shiina, girls light up when it comes to love talks.”

“I’m a guy though.”

“Back then, Kazuki had his hand full with game making, so there was no development between them even though they knew that they liked each other. Both of them were too diligent, or should I say scared…”

Looking at Mashiro, Sorata saw her paying full attention to Koharu’s story.

“Both of them had their own goals. Chihiro wanted to become a painter. Kazuki wanted to create a game. They didn’t have the time to date and they eventually graduated without holding each others’ hand even once.”

This was the first time Sorata heard that Chihiro wanted to become a painter.

“After graduating, Kazuki created his own game company and slowly turned his dream into reality…. However, Chihiro gave up on becoming a painter and became an arts teacher.”

Gave up…. When Sorata heard that word, he’s body swayed for some reason.

“Chihiro is still hung up about it.”

“About what?”

“About what Kazuki said.”

“What did he say?”

“「I like your drawings」…. Kazuki was quite cruel. I can still picture Chihiro’s shocked expressions even today. 「Koharu, what should I do…. I just answered with an 'oh really'.」 I had to spend the whole night talking to her.”

“I find that quite hard to believe.”

That Chihiro was…. Although he couldn’t believe it, Chihiro had her teenage years. She wasn’t an adult from the beginning. She was who she was now because of her pasts.

“But now, she’s an art teacher. Chihiro quit painting after she graduated from university. Her pride is quite high even at this age. She probably thinks that she can’t see Kazuki now.”

Sorata could somewhat understand Chihiro. In the future, if Sorata couldn’t achieve anything, could he really stay by Mashiro’s side? He would be pressed down by an invisible force and will be unable to endure it.

Even now, he spent a few sleepless nights feeling frustrated at himself when comparing himself to the genius and the professional mangaka Mashiro.

Suddenly his phone vibrated in his pocket.

It was a mail. From Nanami.

“Oops.”

Checking the time, he noticed that an hour has already past.

— Come back immediately. I won’t forgive you if you run away.

He quickly typed out his response. Koharu must’ve been satisfied with what she told them, because she said bye and she quickly disappeared along the corridor.

— I’m coming now!

Sending the simple response, Sorata lead Mashiro to go to their respective places.

Part 4

Walking in the opposite direction from where they came from, they passed through the street that cuts through the university and headed towards the high school. He was already accustomed to the looks that Mashiro was getting in her doll-like costume; he only regarded it as the default.

Having said that, he didn't want to stick out like a sore thumb, so he avoided the crowded areas and headed towards an emergency exit. Since it wasn't open during the culture festival, there were only a few amounts of people. As Sorata and Mashiro were walking in the high school area, he saw a couple walking slightly ahead of them. The couple's way of walking and their back look seemed familiar. The boy was Jin, and the girl who had her arm linked with him was Misaki. Jin was in his school uniform while Misaki was in her casuals.

"Huh, are they Jin-senpai and Misaki-senpai?"

"Looks like it."

It was definitely them if Mashiro also agreed with him.

It was just as what Nanami told him. But what was it, this feeling.

Thinking that he could be mistaken, Sorata hid himself under the tree shade and shortened the distance between them and the couple.

Jin and Misaki weren't heading towards the high school building, but started to go off track and headed towards an area where there weren't a lot of people. If one continued down that way, they would be able to find the gardening club's flower beds.

Nanami did tell him to come back quickly, but Sorata just had to find out, so he followed the couple.

No one was there at the flower beds apart from Misaki and Jin.

Hiding behind a small shed, Sorata and Mashiro watched the couple.

Around 15 meters in front of them, Jin and Misaki stood side by side and looked at the

flowers.

“Why are they here…”

Actually, Chihiro and Koharu said that some people tried to make love because of their excitement…

Those two couldn’t be.

“Kohai-kun, if you’re playing hide and seek, then let me be part of it~.”

Sorata nearly screamed at the sudden voice in his ears. Surprised, Sorata covered his mouth with both of his hands.

The speaker was Misaki.

“Misaki, don’t threaten me like that… wait, what?!”

“How do I look, does it suit me?”

Sorata’s surprise was ignored and Misaki spun around to show off her waitress uniform. It was the uniform being used in Sorata’s class.

“Why are you wearing that?”

“I went to Kohai-kun’s class to eat all of the chocobananas and Nanamin lent it to me.”

Misaki didn’t mention what kind of a conversation she had with Nanami, but Sorata decided not to ask about it. It would give him a headache if he does hear it anyway.

“Well, Kohai-kun! Pretty, right!”

“I guess so.”

“You’re pretty, Misaki.”

“… Then, would Jin like it as well?”

Speaking quietly, Misaki said those pitiful words. Why did their confident senpai get so down when it came to dealing with Jin.

"By the way, it's about Jin-senpai."

If Misaki was by Sorata's side right now, then it meant that the woman who was with Jin was obviously not Misaki.

"What about Jin?"

"N-No, nothing at all!"

It would be for the best if he didn't show Jin being with another woman to Misaki. That's what Sorata thought, but Misaki was already looking at somewhere distant. She was looking at where Jin was. He was still talking to Misaki… no, someone who looked like her near the flowerbeds. Who was that girl?

Misaki answered that thought.

"… Sis."

That's right. Misaki had an older sister who was two years older than her. Who was also Jin's ex-girlfriend…. But why was she here? It seemed like they were talking, but Sorata couldn't hear their conversation. Suddenly, Misaki hid near the flowerbeds and approached the couple.

"Ah, senpai!"

Sorata and Misaki unwillingly followed Misaki.

Staring from the shadows, they watched as Misaki's sister, Fuuka opened her mouth.

"What are you trying to do after bringing me to a deserted place?"

Her voice was a lot calmer than Misaki's. Her expression was much more mature than Misaki as well. However, because of the many similarities, it was like watching a Misaki from the future.

"It's enough right? You did play around with me like the way you wanted to. Tell me the reason why we met today."

"Isn't it good enough to meet a childhood friend for no reason?"

"It's awkward to be together. Do you remember what you said to me when we broke

up?”

“How could I ever forget.”

“Really? Normally, people tend to forget if they’re the ones saying those types of things.”

“That was the first time I’ve hurt a person with my own words while getting hurt myself, so it’s something that I’ll never forget.”

Sorata heard about this from Jin before.

— So I’m just a replacement of Misaki for Jin. You just want to have her staying by your side in a pure state, because you’re afraid of hurting Misaki, don’t you?

Jin said that he could still remember those words. Even those last words,

— Make an excuse for yourself at least.

Remained deep inside his heart.

“I was serious about you.”

“I was serious about you as well.”

Misaki bit her lips as she watched the two.

“Then why don’t we start over again?”

“…”

“We became more adult-like than before, right?”

“…”

“I think it’ll work out well this time.”

“Fuuka’s jokes aren’t that funny.”

“It’s a pity, because I was only trying to loosen you up.”

“… I can’t rebel against you, Fuuka. It’s a given that I’ll be nervous.”

“Don’t pull an expression like an abandoned dog. It looks like I’m bullying you.”

“That’s not quite true, but it’s not too off the mark, isn’t it?”

“Well, whatever. I feel slightly better after seeing your face.”

“That’s too mean. So, why did you come here today?”

“So you’re going to sit for an exam for an Osaka university? I heard about it from your mum.”

Sorata tensed up when he heard those words. He couldn’t see Misaki’s face now. His heart was in pain. He wanted to let Misaki know about Jin taking an external exam, but he couldn’t deal with the pressure when the time came.

Carefully, he turned his head around and checked Misaki’s expression. And he saw an expression that was different to his expectation. Misaki was only blinking her eyes and watched Jin and Fuuka with her clear eyes that made it impossible to read what she was thinking.

Sorata expected her to get emotional about it and confront Jin right now, but that didn’t happen. Her expression was quite cold, and that made Sorata feel edgy.

“Nothing’s a secret once we tell our parents huh.”

“Why Osaka?”

“Compared to Suimei University of the Arts, they have a stronger literacy department. That’s the only reason.”

While that might not be a lie, Sorata knew that the biggest reason was to put some distance between him and Misaki. And Fuuka should already be aware of that reason.

“You’ve gotten better at lying.”

“You’re cruel as ever.”

Jin laughed weakly with his shoulders and nose.

“While you were going out with me, you always stayed silent and were bad at lying.”

“Then I guess it’s thanks to your training, Fuuka.”

“I’m not happy with that you know?”

“It’s true that every male needs a strong woman to grow.”

“If you say one more boring comment, I’ll hit you.”

Jin held both of his hands up in surrender.

“You’re still mean as ever. So? Why haven’t you told Misaki?”

“I’ll tell her when the time comes.”

“And when’s that going to be!”

“… Did you come all the way here to tell me that?”

For an instant, Fuuka stopped talking. It meant that Jin was spot on. However, Fuuka quickly recovered.

“For whom do you think I broke up with you?”

Misaki raised her head next to Sorata. She was clenching both of her hands in a fist as she held something back with all her might. It was the first time seeing Misaki like that, so Sorata grew even more nervous.

“It was… for both of us.”

“Really, you’re bold now.”

“I’ll be a university student from next year as well. If I pass that is…. And I can’t keep on acting like a child.”

“Fail it.”

“I think you’re supposed to tell me to do my best and support me. Anyhow, I liked that part about Fuuka.”

“You avoided that nicely.”

“…”

“Jin.”

Fuuka said that name with a serious expression.

“Yes?”

“…”

Fuuka opened her mouth to say something, but she ended up closing it again without

saying anything.

“I’m going home, so accompany me to the station.”

Saying that instead, she started to walk without even waiting for Jin’s response.

“As you wish.”

Putting on an act on purpose, Jin followed behind Fuuka.

The couple passed by the spot Sorata’s group were hiding and went away from where they came from. While that was happening, Misaki was clenching onto Sorata’s arm. Strong enough to leave a red mark….

Even after Jin and Fuuka disappeared out of sight, Misaki didn’t try to let go of Sorata.

“… Misaki-senpai?”

“…”

Strength from Misaki’s two hands quietly left. Misaki slowly stood up from her seat. She dusted off some earth from her clothes, and Sorata and Mashiro did the same.

“…”

Misaki wordlessly stared at the spot the two people were at before.

Sorata tried to talk to her from behind.

“Senpai… I’m sorry.”

“…”

“I knew about it. That Jin-senpai… was going to sit for the Osaka university…”

“Kohai-kun.”

He heard a cracked voice. It was Misaki’s voice.

“W-What is it?”

“I’m… going to work harder so that Jin will be able to notice.”

“Pardon?”

“I hate it now….”

When Misaki turned around as she said that, teardrops were glistening on Misaki’s eyes.

“That I’m not the one who’s by Jin’s side…. It’s hard to hold it back anymore, Kohai-kun!”

A tear streak fell from one of her eyes. Sorata couldn’t say anything.

“I had forgotten…. Ever since Jin started to date my sister, I really regretted it. Thinking, why didn’t I confess my feelings before…”

Mashiro wiped away Misaki’s tears with her paw and patted her head.

“Misaki… don’t cry.”

“Thank you, Mashiron.”

Misaki hugged Mashiro.

“U-Umm… senpai?”

“What?”

Misaki sniffed her nose and spoke in a wet voice.

“Umm, it’s about Jin-senpai going to the Osaka university.”

“Yeah, he did say that.”

“…. What do you mean, he did say that. Is that all?”

Pulling away from Mashiro, Misaki plucked off a leaf from the gardening club’s flowerbeds and noisily blowed her nose,

“Did he say anything after that?”

And looked at Sorata like she didn't understand.

"Huh? No, well, if Jin-senpai gets accepted, then he'll be going to Osaka for his studies. Then you won't be able to see each other every day. Are you OK with that?"

"Kohai-kun, you can't look down on the achievements of humanity! It only takes three hours to Osaka by the bullet train. It takes even shorter by the airplane, so we can meet everyday~!"

"…"

Sorata couldn't close his mouth at all.

He underestimated the alien. Their standard of distance, time and energy was different to a human's. Then why did Sorata keep it a secret? Why did Jin put it off for…. Sorata should tell Jin about this. Even if he was Misaki's childhood friend, Jin wouldn't be able to think of this.

Maybe he should tell him 'if you want to put some distance between you and Misaki, then you need to go to a university on Mars'…. Jin would be so happy, he would cry for sure.

"From today onwards, I'll start my 「Love Attack Strategy」!"

Misaki stood up and punched the air.

Sorata could only bitterly smile at Misaki's infinitely positive mind. But, this was who Misaki was, and Sorata hoped that she would be happy with Jin with her enthusiasm.

"I'll help out as well. Please let me know if there's anything that I can help with."

Sorata knew how Jin was feeling. Misaki might not have noticed it, but Jin loved Misaki more than anyone. However, there was a reason why he couldn't go on a date or become a couple. It was because Misaki's talent was far too bright. If Jin tried to approach that light, he would be burnt by it. His shadow could become darker than darkness itself….

Sorata wanted to believe that Jin and Misaki would be able to overcome those things together.

And he wanted them to tell them this one thing; that there was hope. That it was all that's needed.

If there was only despair, then it would be too cruel for Jin and Misaki…. For Sorata himself as well.

"Thanks, Kohai-kun! I'll do it!"

"That's more like you, Misaki-senpai!"

"Misaki, fight-oh."

"So I'm going to make my move on Jin tonight!"

Declaring this loudly, Misaki raised her hand up high in the air.

Part 5

A lot of people could be felt from the school yard. The burning campfire lit up the starry sky.

Throwing out a large amount of banana peels at the rubbish dump behind the school, Sorata looked up at the dyed red sky.

The last night event of the culture festival has already started, but he was somewhere like there because he had to help out Nanami for spending more than an hour of free time.

He sorted out the food trash from the rest of the rubbish and threw them away accordingly.

With that, he was done. He sweated a lot because of the manual labour, but his sweats quickly disappeared when he stopped moving around. When the sun started to set, the winter weather was quite chilly.

He sighed when his phone vibrated in his pocket.

It was a mail.

When he saw the sender, he instantly thought, “So it has arrived”.

He opened the mail that came all the way in England, over the wide ocean.

— Geez, what is Ryuunosuke thinking! I drew nearly a hundred images, but all he says is「Good work. I congratulate you」. There should be a limit to one’s lack of common sense! I can’t calm down, because the first mail that he sends to me is something like this. It’s not like I helped out in Nyaboron because I wanted to hear something from Ryuunosuke…. But you know, there is a standard on how to talk to someone! He’s the worst! Next time I go to Japan, I’ll teach him on how to treat a woman with my own body. Please tell him to be ready for it, Sorata. Rita Ainsworth.

When Sorata finished reading, he made a troubled expression.

Ryuunosuke’s cold guy act seemed to have an opposite effect to what he was

expecting. At this rate, Ryuunosuke was going to be trapped inside Rita's grip.

For now,

— I'll make sure to tell him.

Sorata sent his reply and closed his phone.

When a folk dance song started to play, the school field's mood started to sway.

"So it has started."

It was a slightly sad melody. However, that wasn't because of the song, but because he knew that the culture festival was now coming to a close. Anyhow, Sorata has seen the Suimei University and its associated high school ever since he was young.

"So that's it for this year."

Sorata felt like it was different to how he felt last year. He could only participate partially in the culture festival because of Nyaboron production, but he didn't regret it. He could still hear it in his ears. The clapping sounds that was deafening and their warm encouragements…

He already wanted to experience that same moment again.

Walking on a path laid out with tiles so that students can walk to the rubbish dump while wearing indoor shoes, Sorata returned to the classroom. He had to report to Nanami that the job was done.

The lights inside the school building were all turned off to lift up the mood of the campfire and it was completely dark inside. The only things that Sorata could rely on were the light from the campfire at the centre of the school yard and the emergency lights.

He headed towards the second floor where the second years' classrooms were.

Since most of the students were gathered around at the school yard, he didn't see anyone in the building.

The folk dance music, which could be heard beyond the building walls, sounded like a radio song from a movie, so he felt like he was acting out a scene in a fictional story

in the empty school building.

A lot of things had happened today. He was on duty for the「Chocobanana Café」, went on a small date with Mashiro during the one hour of free time that Nanami gave to him… and also met Kazuki Fujisawa by a coincidence. Although he didn't know the details, Sorata was surprised about Chihiro's past. It was because he didn't expect to hear about Chihiro from someone like Kazuki. He was also got hit with a great sense of nervousness when he saw what was going on with Jin and Misaki, as well as her sister Fuuka. He was restless and anxious. He was surprised yet again by Misaki's positive personality. Rita's mail came just now as well. Today has really been an eventful day.

There shouldn't be another event today.

When Sorata reached his classroom and grabbed the door, he stopped moving.

"Aoyama!"

Because he heard a nervous voice from the classroom.

Peeking through the door, Sorata saw Nanami in her waitress uniform and his friend Daichi Miyahara standing in front of her.

"Ah, I'm nearly done, so you can go and enjoy the last night of the culture festival, Miyahara. I feel bad making you to help me when we're in different classes."

"No, I've got something to say."

Thinking that he shouldn't listen to them, Sorata gave up on peeking at them. If he could, he wanted to run away as far as possible. However, if he moved too suddenly, he might make a noise. If he did, he would be interrupting the two in the classroom. As Sorata didn't know what to do, Daichi continued to talk in a shaking voice.

"I like you."

"…"

Even Sorata became nervous at those words. He did think that it could be possible, but to actually hear it…

"Truth be told, I volunteered for the committee because of you. Because I thought

we'll be able to hang out with that as an excuse even if we're in different classes."

"…."

"Even when Kanda was staying in the normal dormitories… we looked after those cats together right? I've only thought about you all that time."

Nanami kept silent. Sorata was curious about how the situation was looking, so he peeked inside and saw Nanami just listening with her head bowed.

“I’ve liked you… for a while.”

“Yeah.”

Nanami’s voice could finally be heard. Sorata held his breath and subconsciously stretched out his neck.

“You’re all that I think of these days, and I imagine different imaginations as well….”

“What? I-Imaginations?!”

“Ah! What am I saying. Um… I just picture myself going to an amusement park with you on a date or something. Uhh, sorry.”

“Anything else?”

“Places like the zoo or the pool, and the beach as well…. Please don’t ask any more!”

Daichi put his hands together in apology and bowed his head to Nanami. At his look, Nanami laughed.

“Whoa, you’re so mean. Are you laughing at my confession?”

“S-Sorry, I didn’t mean to…. But I just think that you’re really innocent.”

“Are you saying that I’m stupid?”

“No, no!”

Daichi loosened up seeing Nanami’s expression soften up.

“You’re denying it so strongly, Aoyama…. I’ve been treated as an idiot.”

“Don’t put it like that. I’m just saying my honest opinions.”

“Then please answer me while you’re being honest.”

Sorata could tell that Nanami’s expression has changed from far away as well.

Sorata’s heart hurt even though it didn’t concern him. He distanced himself from the door and blocked his ears.

“Sorry.”

But he could still hear Nanami’s voice clearly.

“Ah~, it’s no good huh~.”

Daichi moaned like as if he was throwing up all of his feelings that he had bottled up in himself.

“I knew this was going to happen, but it would’ve been more painful if I kept it to myself.”

“Miyahara… sorry.”

“You don’t need to say it twice.”

“Ah… Miya… no, umm…”

“It’s fine. I’m sorry for making you feel uncomfortable. I didn’t want to see you making that sad face. But with this, I can concentrate on my swimming training.”

“Miyahara…”

“Don’t worry about it. It might get awkward when we bump into each other in the corridor, but I’m sorry. I’ll apologise beforehand.”

Daichi laughed loudly as he spoke in a joking tone.

“Then, I’ll take your offer and head out first.”

“Yeah…”

“You’re coming later as well right, Aoyama?”

Nanami didn’t answer to that question.

Daichi approached the door. Sensing that, Sorata took off his indoor shoes and ran towards the stairs so that he wouldn’t be detected. Hiding on the stairway from the second floor to the third, Sorata watched Daichi running down the stairs while screaming in an indescribable way.

— Confess.

Sorata repeated that word in his heart. He pictured Mashiro's face as he did.

After waiting for a while, Sorata returned to the classroom Nanami was in.

"I threw out the trash."

He told Nanami, who was fixing up the tables, in the most natural way he could.

"You're quite late."

"R-Really?"

"And you're timing is too perfect."

Nanami looked at Sorata with a suspecting look. Sorata raised both of his hands up in surrender.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to overhear you guys."

"Yeah."

"And I won't tell anyone. I promise."

"… I know that much."

Nanami answered half heartedly and moved towards a table near the windows and sat on it. And she looked outside at the night sky that was lit up because of the campfire.

"I was really nervous."

"But it looked like you were pretty confident."

"It's not like that was the first time."

"What?"

"You don't need to be that surprised. And it was only once when I graduated from middle school…."

Nanami looked over her shoulders at Sorata with an unpleasant expression.

"Miyahara… is someone who's easy to talk to and has no faults, but why can't he be?"

It was hard to tell what kind of expression Nanami was making in front of him.

Sorata also approached the windows and leaned on a table next to Nanami's.

"It would be so easy to like a person who likes you."

Their voices echoed slowly around their classroom and the two of them silently enjoyed the view of the night sky.

"…"

"…"

"Do you have someone that you like, Aoyama?"

The words flowed out without him noticing. Sorata was surprised at himself.

Looking sideways, Sorata and Nanami's eyes met.

It was obvious that Sorata wouldn't hear the answer.

However, Nanami replied.

"I do."

At that moment, fireworks flew and every time they exploded, they lit up Sorata and Nanami. Nanami looked straight at Sorata. Like he was being sucked in by a mystical power, Sorata couldn't take his eyes off her.

When the fireworks that were shot up on a short interval faded away, both the sky and the classroom became submerged in darkness.

"Did you hear me?"

"Ah, yeah."

"But I'll repeat myself just in case."

"Huh?"

"I do have someone that I like."

When the fireworks shot up again, Nanami was no longer looking at Sorata.

Nanami watched the fireworks in a wonder and whispered that they were pretty. Sorata looked at her side.

“The enjoyable festival’s now coming to a close.”

Nanami whispered as she looked straight outside.

“You know, a girl told me this. 「Nyaboron was really fun」.”

“I had someone telling me that as well. I was really surprised.”

And he was really happy.

“Yeah… so I felt like trying harder. It was really motivating to see them speak with their eyes sparkling.”

“I know. I’m thinking about submitting a game entry every week instead of every month.”

“I can’t lose to Kanda.”

“But don’t push yourself too hard and collapse.”

“Speak for yourself. Your body doesn’t only belong to you.”

“Don’t say things that’ll cause a misunderstanding.”

Not responding to that, Nanami sprang off the table.

“Let’s go outside.”

“Hmm? Ah, yeah.”

“Come on! It’ll be over soon.”

Nanami grabbed Sorata’s hand and started to run.

“Ah, hey, Aoyama!”

They ran down the stairs after exiting the classroom. No matter how much he yelled,

Nanami didn't stop, nor did she let go of his hand.

The last day of the culture festival. It was a day full of numerous events. By the end of the day, Sorata realised that Nanami's hand was much smaller than Sorata's. The chilly wind reminded them how warm their hands were.

Winter was approaching soon. The fourth season counting from spring. The end of the year. Whether they wanted it or not, the last season of the year was coming.

However, Sorata soon forgot about the upcoming season.

Because when Sorata and Nanami came out to the field… the other four Sakurasou members, Misaki, Jin, Ryuunosuke and Mashiro, were waiting for them.

"Let's celebrate the success of Nyaboron while we're at it~!"

Declaring that, Misaki lit up a firework.

"This was what you meant by celebration?!"

But it was too late. The fireworks started to go off in the middle of the school yard. And with a thundering sound, a bright flower bloomed over their heads.

What happened next was quite obvious.

"Argh! Is it Sakurasou again!"

The ghostly figure of the PE teacher approached them.

"Now then, should we run away?"

Jin has already started to run as he said that. Sorata grabbed Mashiro's hand and started to run as well. Feeling Mashiro's unwillingness to run with her own feet, he suddenly thought of something.

— I'll talk to Mashiro about what happened at the airport if I pass the next game entry.

I should be able to face Mashiro with confidence then…. I should be able to accept my feelings about her then…

9th of November.

The following were recorded on the Sakurasou meeting log.

— Fireworks were pretty. By- Mashiro Shiina.

— I've said this before, but the meeting log is not a diary! By- Sorata Kanda.

— Taiyaki was delicious. By- Mashiro Shiina

— Listen to me! By- Sorata Kanda.

— By the way, when are we holding the reflection on 「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」? By- Ryuunosuke Akasaka.

— Do we need to reflect on it when it was a great success? By- Sorata Kanda.

— Every project is completed with a reflection. A project without a reflection is like lunch without tomatoes, Sorata-sama. By- Maid-chan.

Chapter 3 - Symptoms of Winter

Part 1

Sorata stared aimlessly at the scattered clouds floating in the clear blue sky. In his hands he held a broom and a dustpan.

The warm sunlight put his mind at ease and although now was a perfect time for a nap, the cold air that he breathed in reminded him that the season was quickly changing over to winter.

“Such nice weather…”

Ten days had passed since the cultural festival ended. It is the 19th of November. In a month from now, the year will be over.

The two months of excitement (including the preparation time) during the cultural festival season had now worn off, and with the end of year exams coming up, it was a time of low spirits.

Even so, the rooftop during lunch break had a happy atmosphere to it.

Left and right there were newly-formed couples from the cultural festival happily having lunch. Boyfriends were pleased at getting to eat a lunch made for them by their girlfriends. The boys were making dumb faces as they opened their mouths and went「Ahh~」. There were some girls who plucked off rice grains stuck to their boyfriend’s face.

Among the couples only Sorata was wearing a bored expression. Naturally, he wasn’t there out of his own free will. He was fully aware that this area was basically booked out by couples. If he didn't have to clean the roof as a punishment from the student council due to the events at the cultural festival, he wouldn’t even be up here.

The reason as to why it was only Sorata on the roof, was that the school split up the six Sakurasou members into pairs because they would cause trouble if they were alone. So they were distributed to different places in the school at different times.

With each pair assigned to a spot, Sorata and Ryuunosuke had to clean the rooftop during this time period. But unfortunately, Ryuunosuke was nowhere to be sighted. He was probably updating Maid-chan somewhere.

Nanami and Mashiro had to clean the classroom that the cultural festival committee used, while Misaki and Jin had to clean the yard.

Sighing, Sorata collected a leaf that had flown in out of nowhere into the dustpan. Looking around the rooftop, he didn't see any more sizable rubbish.

This should be enough.

Sorata scored an empty bench and laid back facing the sky.

"Such great weather…."

A blue sky filled up his view. It felt like he could be sucked into its wideness.

As if trying to wake up from that illusion, Sorata let his eyes close slightly.

When he breathed slowly, he could block out the couples' conversations from around him. He could only hear the sound of the sky.

As he did that for a while, it felt like he could hear someone's voice from afar. It wasn't just the voice of one or two people. It was a great swaying sound like an approaching hail storm. Soon, Sorata realised that those voices weren't coming from his ears, but from his memories.

His body remembered the enthusiasm of the 300 people on that Nyaboron presentation day. Every time the crowds' cheers and claps reached his ears, a thrilling ecstasy crept up his spine.

It was the first time he'd been that excited. 300 people were happy about the work he created. Sorata and his work were being recognised by people. He felt that it was worth it to sacrifice his sleep, and it made him confident.

Because he felt that he was able to make someone happy.

He was able to achieve beyond what he always wanted to do.

"That… was really amazing."

He wanted to taste that excitement again… no, as many times as he could.

And so Sorata immersed himself into writing up entries for「Let's make a game」.

His determination also came from meeting a game creator named Kazuki Fujisawa during the cultural festival. He was surprised but also motivated after hearing that Kazuki thought up a game every day. He did feel anxious about it, but he also felt like he was being encouraged to push himself.

A game proposal that he worked on straight after the cultural festival was completed in just three days. He thought of it to be the best idea that he'd ever come up with. He also thought that it was a work of great quality. He asked Mashiro to draw an illustration for the proposal, and thanks to that the proposal looked even better. He took pride in that proposal and submitted it right away.

After a week had passed, he had finally received a letter yesterday.

He took out the envelope from his uniform pocket. He had already checked the contents.

Failed. Eliminated from the judging. A complete defeat.

With that, he was eliminated from the get-go three times in a row. The only work that he was able to get to the presentation stage was his first proposal, the rest of them were all fruitless efforts.

It was hard to take the failure on a work in, that he was so confident about.

What was wrong with it? He couldn't think of a good reason after looking at the letter that he had now received numerous times.

"Sigh…"

At this rate, he wouldn't be able to ask Mashiro about that day. Sorata strictly obeyed the requirements he had set for himself.

But still he sighed.

Even though so many people enjoyed the「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」, why wouldn't things work out with the game audition? What was he doing wrong?

"Life is so hard…"

"Thinking about your life on this cold rooftop full of couples would make you want to die, so stop that."

When Sorata opened his eyes, he saw Jin next to him.

“But you’re also alone.”

“I’m fine, because you’re my target.”

Joking like that, Jin sat down next to Sorata and bit into a croquet bread bought at the canteen.

“You don’t have Misaki-senpai’s handmade lunch today.”

“I’m running away from her. She’s been so active lately.”

“…”

Knowing the reason as to why Misaki was acting like that, Sorata could only remain silent.

“Anyway, why are you so down? Are you burnt out from the cultural festival?”

“No, it’s because of this.”

He pulled himself up and showed Jin the game audition result envelope. Jin took it, but gave it back to Sorata without looking inside. Instead, he shoved his croquet bread into his mouth.

“Unfortunately you didn’t make it this time, huh?”

“This time, again.”

“It must be hard on you when you were so confident about this one.”

“…I really thought that I’d be able to make it this time.”

“You reckoned there wasn’t a game which was as good as this?”

“I can’t say that… but I did think that I’d be able to make it.”

“Hm~mm.”

Jin answered indifferently. Without looking at somewhere particularly, Jin took out a carton of coffee and drank it.

“I think I was mistaken after making Nyaboron.”

“Is that so.”

“I think I was too proud of myself, thinking that I was great because lots of people enjoyed it.”

“Nyaboron was great.”

Sorata also felt the same way.

“But I wasn’t the one who made it great.”

“That’s quite a negative way of looking at it.”

“I think I’m being self-critical.”

“I see. So, what did you realise from that?”

“Misaki-senpai… is amazing.”

Each scene had much more impact than Sorata could have imagined. The camera angles and special effects had portrayed the already superb artwork and animation in an outstanding way… everything was perfect and there was no fault whatsoever with it.

“She always said that she wanted to create something with the Sakurasou members when Mashiro moved in this spring. When Aoyama moved in this summer, she became even more determined.”

“I already knew this before, but Shiina… is also amazing.”

“Those two are on a completely different level. Don’t worry about it.”

“Without Akasaka, we wouldn’t have been able to optimise all the balance checks.”

“Then those three are different.”

“And it was only possible thanks to Senpai and Aoyama…”

“Then, are you trying to say that it would’ve been possible 「even if I wasn’t here」?”

“I don’t want to think of it like that… but it might not be too far from the truth. Anyone could’ve done my part and produce the same result.”

“There probably aren’t that many things that only us can do. Because we’re not that special.”

Jin was probably right. He was right, but it was difficult to abandon the satisfaction he gained from the idea that「this was only possible because of me」. Sorata didn’t know how to give up that thought. He wanted to become unique and that was all he could think about. Was that so wrong?

“Well, even if we know that, we still want to be special. I want to as well.”

As Jin said that, he crumpled up the now empty carton in his hand.

“I misunderstood, thinking that the cheers and claps were directed at me…”

That was why he felt so confident. That was why he felt like he could pass the game audition and somehow pull through the presentation stage.

“So you feel like someone’s woken you up to reality with that letter, when you were too proud of yourself?”

“Please don’t be so blunt about it.”

“I… also went through a similar experience.”

Jin laughed at himself thinking about his past.

“I misunderstood the reviews about the anime that Misaki and I had created as my own and I was really done in.”

“Senpai…”

“All I was able to do was to grab on to Misaki’s ankle.”

“…”

“But it’s also true that I became motivated because of that misunderstanding. If I wouldn't have experienced that thrill, I probably wouldn’t have thought about becoming a scriptwriter for real. Next time, I want to achieve that same thrill with my

own skills."

"So do I."

"That's why you're continuing to submit the entries, aren't you?"

"That's true, but it doesn't feel like I'm progressing and it's not rewarding at all. I don't know if this is OK and what I should do… The more I think about it, the more unsure I become."

"A dead end, huh."

"Yes."

"And you must be even more restless because Mashiro's progressing steadily."

"W-Why are you bringing up Shiina now?"

"You should know exactly why, right?"

"…"

"It's starting this month, doesn't it? Her manga."

Sorata nodded and closed his eyes.

Mashiro is starting her serialisation from tomorrow, the 20th of November. It was about six university students who lived in a communal house. It was based on Sakurasou. He promised Mashiro that they would go and purchase a copy of the magazine when it was released.

"I realised something after making anime with Misaki over and over again."

Holding back a yawn, Jin laid down on the bench, just like Sorata was doing until a few moments ago.

"Someone said that failure is the mother of all successes, but that's a lie."

"Huh?"

"All that you can learn from a failure is how to avoid failing again, so it's not like we can learn how to succeed."

"…That's…"

Jin could be right. However, if that was the case, then how could one succeed?

"The only way to succeed, is to learn from your success, Sorata."

"And how do we do that?"

"We just need to succeed."

"You're contradicting yourself."

"Someone who wins, will always win. So it's like that, isn't it?"

"So in the end, are you trying to say that we have to go through countless failures until we taste our first success?"

This would be too painful.

"If you can analyse where you went wrong and why you failed, instead of trying to forget about it, it will become a valuable experience."

And Sorata already knew how hard that was. He was still hesitant about opening up the files for his failed game proposals.

He thought that he couldn't ignore them. He knew how important it was to reflect on his mistakes after the 「Galactic Cat Nyaboron」 reflection meeting. Because he felt that the improvements, suggested individually by the members after discussing some of the issues that they faced, had been very effective.

For example, the inconsistency with the character outfits. The background scene was set in winter, but the Nekoko that Mashiro drew was wearing cool colours reminiscent of early spring. Since they only noticed after colouring in everything, they had to redraw the scene completely. They once got the night and day mixed up similarly as well.

About the issue:

—Then next time we need to add an 「outfit」 and 「time phase」 as part of the checklist. Also, it would be good if we add to the list the 「location」 too, just in case.

Jin had suggested.

And if the outsourcer tells the person in charge directly, then the message can be delivered properly.

Nanami added.

—And the person in charge must check the「outfit」,「time phase」and「location」on the checklist first before starting to work on anything,

Ryuunosuke summarised.

And so, the discussion flowed on like that, covering every issue in the production of Nyaboron. The discussion log grew extensively.

—Next time we do any other productions, we need to read this reflection log first. That way, we can reduce the risks of making the same mistakes.

After spending a long time on the reflection, Ryuunosuke wrapped it up. Thanks to that, Sorata understood the importance of reflecting.

“So reflecting on the mistakes in the past can be a preparation for the future…”

“That was useful, wasn’t it, Kouhai-kun!”

However, it was hard to do the same thing with his game proposals by himself. Since he worked on it by himself, it was hard to view it in a critical way. Listing the good and the bad points about the proposal was especially hard. Without being able to come up with a conclusion that he was satisfied with, he felt like he was talentless and so he felt melancholic.

“So, Sorata.”

Jin’s tone quickly changed from light to serious.

“W-What is it?”

Sorata asked in a small voice.

“There are lovey-dovey couples around us, but why are we having an embarrassing conversation between men?”

"It doesn't matter for you, Senpai, since you have six girlfriends! You've got the mood going on every night! You've already reached the world of adults that I don't even know about!"

"Do you even know how hard it is to date six different people?"

"Then date only one person! You brought that onto yourself!"

"That's impossible."

"I'm going to ask first. So, why is that?"

"Because love can save the world."

"Never mind. I was the idiot for even asking you."

"Let me tell you because you're misunderstanding something."

"No, I don't think I'm misunderstanding anything about you. You're an enemy to both women and men!"

"Just because you've got a girlfriend doesn't mean you do *it* every night."

"R-Really?"

"Well, you should go and get a girlfriend quickly. Christmas is only a month away."

"…You're right."

It was already that time of the year.

During Christmas last year, he was forced by Misaki into planting a huge maple tree in Sakurasou's garden, so it was backbreaking labour. Afterwards, Sorata ended up wearing a Rudolf costume when Misaki gathered up the kids in the neighbourhood while dressed up as Santa Claus. That season had arrived again, but he felt that things were going to be different than last year.

Misaki would want to spend time alone with Jin.

Then what would the other Sakurasou members do?

Thinking these thoughts, the rooftop door opened and familiar faces showed up. It was

Mashiro and Nanami. When their eyes met, the two of them came towards Sorata and Jin.

“What’s up?”

“Mashiro came to the class looking for Kanda, so I brought her here.”

However, Mashiro looked at Sorata quietly and was motionless.

“Shiina? Do you need something from me?”

“I don’t.”

“What?”

“Huh?”

Sorata and Nanami asked at the same time.

“You didn’t come here because you needed something?”

“I don’t need anything.”

“I don’t get what you’re saying.”

Without batting an eye to Sorata’s unwilling expression, Mashiro quietly sat down close enough to Sorata for their shoulders to touch and started to eat her lunch. On top of that, Sorata was the one who had made her lunch after waking up at half past six.

“Did you come to check up on our promise for tomorrow?”

“Promise?”

Mashiro made an expression like she didn’t understand.

“The day the magazine goes on sale.”

“…Ah, right.”

“What do you mean「ah, right」? Don’t tell me… you forgot about it?”

“I remember.”

“Don’t lie!”

If Mashiro was coming and looking for Sorata when she didn’t need him for anything or if she even forgot about the release date of her manga magazine, then there was something wrong with her today.

“Aoyama… what happened?”

“Don’t ask me.”

Pouting to show her complaint, Nanami sat on the bench in front of them and started on her lunch.

It was harder to read the mood than usual.

Then, suddenly, the rooftop door burst open. The one who appeared and attracted the stares from all the couples and Sakurasou members on the roof was the one and only alien of Suimei High… Misaki.

“Found you, Kouhai-kun!”

Without paying any attention to anything else, she found the Sakurasou members and focused on them straight away. She came running towards them with her skirt flapping and her huge breasts bouncing.

And without even looking at Sorata, she extended a lunchbox to Jin who was lying down on the bench.

“Here, Jin. Here’s your lunch!”

“…”

“…Huh?”

Jin didn’t show any response. He was fast asleep.

“What should I do, Kouhai-kun!”

“You can just wake him up.”

“It’s a one in a million chance!”

“I’m not sure if I understand what you mean.”

Nanami, holding her chopsticks in her mouth, also tilted her head at Misaki’s words.

However, there was no way that Misaki was going to answer Sorata and Nanami’s questions. With a nervous expression that was different from usual, Misaki stared at Jin’s sleeping face and drew her lips close to him like she was trying to cover his body.

Holding back a strand of her hair that had slipped down with her hand, she was somewhat sexy.

Just before Misaki’s lips touched Jin’s, Jin opened his eyes and pushed Misaki’s face away in a violent manner as he stood up.

“Who are you trying to pounce on to during the day.”

“How can I wait until the night?!”

“Don’t pounce on to me, even if you do wait. I’m sensing that my body’s in danger, so I’m going to go to Suzune’s house.”

If it was Suzune, it was probably the「Race Queen」[13]. Where did they meet? Sorata has never met a 'Race Queen' before in his whole life.

“Here, Jin. Today’s lunch.”

“Thanks.”

Pretending that the kiss attempt never happened, Jin accepted the lunchbox in a natural manner. Misaki seemed to pretend that she didn’t hear the talk about Suzune. Sorata, who was only observing, was probably feeling more nervous than the two. Nanami must’ve felt the same way, because her chopsticks stopped moving and she was watching Jin and Misaki as if being sucked into something.

“But Jin-senpai, didn’t you just…”

He was going to say「eat the croquet bread」, but

“Ah, that’s right. Sorata’s feeling down because of the game audition results, so why don’t Mashiro and Aoyama cheer him up.”

He was cut off by Jin.

“Wait, what are you saying?!”

There was no way that his complaint was going to make Jin go back on his words.

“Sorata.”

Led by Mashiro’s voice, Sorata turned around to see her extending the green lunchbox separators [14] - something called a baran or other.

“I’ll give you this, so cheer up.”

“As if I would! No, you don’t eat *that* either! And I’m the one who packed that lunch!”

Sorata already ate the same lunch as Mashiro before he cleaned up the roof, so he wasn’t happy at all.

“Kanda, do you want to have this?”

Nanami brought a chicken meatball on a toothpick towards his mouth.

“N-No…”

If he ate it like that, then it would seem like they were a couple. And as Sorata was hesitating like that, Mashiro quickly extended her body and snatched the piece of chicken with her mouth.

“Ah, Mashiro!”

Without showing a change in her expression, Mashiro chewed and gulped it down.

“Nanami, it was delicious.”

“T-Thanks… That’s not it! I was going to give it to…”

“What is Sorata’s, is mine.”

“No, it’s not!”

Sorata had to quickly rebuke Mashiro's stupid comment.

“Then, am I Sorata’s?”

“That’s even more wrong!”

“Kanda’s an idiot…”

Nanami pouted in complaint.

“That development is too absurd, I cannot accept it!”

“No~, it’s a great development.”

Thinking that it didn’t involve him at all, Jin spoke rightfully.

Jin was opening up the lunchbox that he got from Misaki.

On top of a layer of rice, a heart mark was drawn out with salmon flakes and at the centre was the word「LOVE」written out in minced chicken.

At the straightforward confession, Sorata spat out the water that he was drinking from a water bottle and Nanami choked on her food.

“So dirty.”

Jin calmly pointed them out. Even when Sorata looked at Jin with a questionable look, he pretended not to pay attention to the confession and ate up Misaki’s love - physically - eating the side dishes and the rice in the lunch box with his chopsticks.

“Sorata, if you look at me that way, I might fall in love.”

“Don’t spout off your nonsense.”

“Young people these days don’t have respect for their seniors.”

Mashiro stared intensely at Jin’s lunch.

“What is it, Mashiro? Is there a side dish you want?”

She shook her head. Yet, she didn’t take her eyes off the lunch. It looked like she was deep in thought with the chopsticks in her mouth. No, she might be staring blankly just as usual.

Jin finished the lunch and packed it up again after closing the lid.

Misaki looked at Jin like she was expecting something. Jin should've noticed it, but didn't say a thing.

Sorata got the chills at the strange atmosphere.

"Sorata, if you need to go to the toilet, then go."

"I don't!"

"It's not good to hold it in, Aoyama."

"I don't need to either!"

"It'll be too late when you get a bladder infection."

Saying that, Jin stood up from the bench first.

And with a farewell of「I'll be going first」, he left the rooftop.

The warning bell, that notified them of the last 5 minutes of lunch break, rang out.

"Ah, it's the warning bell. Let's go, Mashiron!"

"OK."

Being dragged by Misaki, Mashiro stood up.

"Did you know this, Kouhai-kun! All of the arts students are coming together in the afternoon practical for a sketching competition!"

"No, I wasn't aware."

"I won't lose to Mashiron!"

"I won't lose to Misaki."

The two of them left, emitting off a weird aura as they headed off to their afternoon class. Sorata waited for Nanami to pack up her lunch and they also headed off to their classroom.

As they were going down the stairs, Sorata asked Nanami:

“So what did Shiina want from me in the end?”

“Who knows.”

Nanami was being cold for some reason. She kept looking straight ahead.

“I think I’m sensing that you’re feeling upset for some reason, Aoyama.”

“…Not really.”

“Then that’s good.”

“…Yeah.”

“Isn’t there something wrong with Shiina lately?”

Mashiro coming to Sorata for no reason was somewhat understandable, but it was very strange of her to forget about her own manga magazine publishing date. If Sorata was in her shoes, his head would’ve been full of thoughts regarding the publishing date.

“You wouldn't know, Kanda.”

“Huh, does that mean that you know?”

“I know, but I’m not going to tell you.”

“I think that it’s unlike you to act so mean, Aoyama.”

“I’m not that much of a nice person.”

As if she was trying to leave Sorata behind, Nanami picked up her pace and returned to the classroom.

And Sorata quickly followed after her.

“H-Hey, Aoyama! Wait!”

“No.”

“You know, don’t you think you’re being mean to me every now and then?”

“Don’t know.”

Puffing out her cheeks slightly, she showed an unsatisfied expression.

“See, like now.”

Even when he pointed it out, Nanami glared at him, like she was trying to intimidate him, and didn’t offer a reply.

Part 2

It was the last Sunday of November and Sorata had been working on a new game proposal since morning.

From the time he had decided to write a proposal up every week of this month, this was the fourth one. He had already received failure notices on his first two submissions, and he was waiting on the third one.

After finishing up his proposal, Sorata stood up from the desk and laid down on his bed to rest. The cat that was already having a nap on it snored and showed her complaint. He lifted her up and saw that it was the brown-striped Tsubasa. When she let out another 「nya~」, Sorata let her down, only for Tsubasa to hop on to his stomach and continue napping.

Thanks to the cat, his body felt warm on that spot. As he was about to close his eyes in comfort, the door opened without a knock.

“Sorata.”

Thanks to that, Sorata's sleepiness flew off somewhere. In a way that didn't wake up Tsubasa, he moved her gently towards the end of the bed from his stomach and lifted himself up.

“You know, Shiina.”

“What is it?”

“What would you've done if I was changing my boxers?!”

“Knock.”

“But it'd be too late!”

“You can't really say that.”

“Hoo, care to tell me the reason?”

“It's not good to ask for an answer from someone so urgently.”

“So you're saying that you answered me without caring?”

“You can't really say that.”

“Whatever! Anyway, what is it?”

“It's done.”

Mashiro showed the A4 paper that she was hiding behind her back to Sorata.

It was the illustration for the game proposal that Sorata was working on. There were two different cuts that showed off the game screen layout and the feel of the game. It was something that he asked her to do this morning, but she had already finished it.

The content was just like how his rough sketches displayed… or rather, the illustrations were completely on a different level.

“How are they?”

“They're perfect… Thanks.”

“Yeah.”

Sorata took the paper from Mashiro and quickly scanned it. All he had to do now was to attach it to his proposal and he would be done.

“By the way, Shiina, did you finish your manuscript? Didn't you say that your December issue was due tomorrow morning?”

“It's OK."

“I’m sure you’ll do well by yourself, but you only need to help me when you’ve got time. Prioritize your manuscript first.”

“Are you going to ask Misaki?”

“It’s not something urgent, so I can wait.”

“Yeah. Ok.”

“Yep.”

“…”

Did she have something else that she needed? Mashiro didn’t try to say anything and didn’t leave Sorata’s room.

“Shiina?”

“Umm.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Promise me you won't get angry.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re obviously going to say something stupid now.”

“It’s quite normal.”

“Then say it without making it sound suspicious!”

Mashiro slightly avoided his gaze. But she must’ve made up her mind, because she then looked straight into Sorata’s eyes.

“I want to pack a lunch.”

Although they were words that Sorata knew, he blinked like he couldn’t comprehend them.

“Could you repeat that, please?”

“I want to eat lunch.”

“Don’t change your words!”

“I want to pack a lunch.”

It seemed like Sorata wasn’t out of it; nor was he being delusional, crazy or mishearing things. Mashiro said this just now for sure.

-I want to pack a lunch.

“Listen up, Shiina. I’m about to say something very important.”

“What is it?”

“Give. It. Up.”

Sorata stressed each syllable slowly and clearly.

“Why?”

“Because I can see the world coming to an end!”

“I want to pack a lunch even if the world comes to an end.”

“Get rid of that kind of determination!”

“Not possible.”

“Why not?! Is it for your manga? Do you need it?”

If so, all negotiations would be impossible. Sorata might end up being the human sacrifice. It gave him the chills just thinking about it…

“It’s not related to the manga.”

“Then why?! Why are you making me go through this strife?!”

“…”

“Why aren’t you saying anything?”

“Anyhow, I want to pack a lunch.”

“You’re not satisfied with the lunches I pack? So you’re telling me to improve my culinary skills? Then just say that! I’ll try to learn from Jin-senpai!”

“That’s not it.”

“Then why?!”

"…"

"Why did you just go silent again?!"

"I want to…"

"Shiina, listen to me. Humanity has unlimited potential. There will be a time when we're able to go on manned explorations on Mars. But there will be things that are impossible. People cannot grow wings. Just accept that. We're already in high school, aren't we?"

As Sorata was trying his hardest to persuade her, Jin, who was smartly dressed, walked in front of Room 101. Was he going to sleep over at one of his girls' place again?

"It seems interesting enough, so why don't you teach her?"

And he even gave out useless advice.

"At least try to hide your personal opinions about it being interesting!"

"Since Mashiro's good at drawing, she's good with her hands. Don't you think she might be well-suited for cooking?"

"Do you actually believe that?"

"I just put it out there to see if you get tricked by it."

"Then why don't you teach Shiina how to cook, senpai?!"

"Teach her while holding her hand, her leg and then her waist?"

"Physical contact is banned!"

"You'll be disliked if you're too possessive. Well, I'm going to see Rumi now."

"Anyway, Sorata, come here."

Mashiro grabbed Sorata's arm and vigorously pulled him out of his room.

"Whoa, you idiot, don't cling onto my arm!"

Tripping over his own feet because of the sudden jerk, Sorata was dragged by Mashiro to the kitchen. Jin followed them and smirked at Sorata's situation.

"Didn't you say that you've got a date to go to?! Hurry up and go!"

"Hmm? I've got some time until the date."

As he said that, Jin, being in a bystander role, took out an apron from the kitchen cabinet and put it on Mashiro.

"All right, we're good to go."

It was on her properly with the fastened string behind her back. But how should he say it; the pink apron didn't suit her in some way. No, it was pretty, but it felt like he was watching an image that wasn't meant to be.

"How is it, Sorata?"

"Take it off."

"Ho~, what an unexpected turn of events."

"That's not what I meant! I can just tell without looking, that cooking does not go well with Shiina!"

"I will do it."

"That thought itself is scary! All I can think about is the mess you're going to make!"

It was then when Nanami came downstairs.

"Really, what's with the commotion?"

She must be going to the academy soon. On her shoulder was a large bag with the clothes she was going to change into.

"Shiina's trying to do something that will bring forth the end of the world."

"What are you saying?"

"Ah, that's right. Aoyama."

Interrupting the rhythm, Jin called out Nanami's name.

"What is it?"

Nanami asked with a suspecting look.

"Here are some tickets for a play, so go and take someone to see it."

Jin passed a pair of paper tickets to Nanami as he said that.

"Ah, isn't this the famous one? I heard that these were hard to get…"

"Seems like it. I got them from Rumi, but I don't think I can go. But still, going with someone else isn't an option. So I'm giving them to you."

"Is it really OK?"

"Yep. The play is next month, so just take whoever you want."

"The play is on… the 24th?!"

Looking at the tickets, Nanami muttered「Christmas Eve」. And when she looked up and met Sorata's eyes, Nanami looked away with a ferocious speed.

"A-Anyway, thank you. I need to go to the academy now…"

Nanami walked out, looking taken aback. Sorata, Jin and Mashiro watched her back as she went on her way.

"So full of life~"

Jin calmly spoke out his views, but Sorata didn't understand what he meant and he didn't have the time to dwell on it. It was now Sorata's mission and his trial to somehow deal with the Mashiro who said that she wanted to pack lunch.

"Sorata."

"Yes, what is it?"

"I."

"Uh huh."

“Cook.”

“Why did you cut it down to two words?! And are you really serious?”

Mashiro looked quietly at him. When her clear eyes looked at him, his heart started to beat faster as expected. But since he felt like he would lose if he was to look away, he kept his gaze up.

“I’m really serious.”

“…Someone please tell me that I'm dreaming.”

“You shouldn’t rely on someone to do things for you.”

“I don’t know about anyone else, but out of all people, you shouldn't be saying that!”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Ah~, really now.”

He could only give up in resignation.

“More than that, are you sure your manuscript will be OK? Isn’t it behind schedule because of the Nyaboron production? And… these days, it feels like…”

“Feels like, what?”

“No… never mind…”

Compared to before, it felt like Mashiro was spending less time on her manga. When they were working on Nyaboron, he thought that Nyaboron was the cause, but Mashiro still hasn’t picked up her pace even after the culture festival had ended. Instead, she didn’t really do anything and simply sat dazed like she was pondering about something.

As of late, it was hard to see the Mashiro who drew whenever… no, who drew her manga-manuscript even when it wasn’t time to draw.

She lived for manga and manga alone, going as far as dumping all her housework on Sorata. That was the Mashiro Shiina that Sorata knew, but something felt really different.

Had she been the Mashiro during the summer holidays, she never would've said that she wanted to learn how to pack a lunch.

So at Mashiro's sudden demand, Sorata was lost as to how he should deal with the situation.

She did appear to be normal right now, and considering the future, her having an interest in cooking could be considered joyful. There was no guarantee that someone will continue to look after Mashiro. She wasn't going to stay at Sakurasou forever either. Of course, Sorata would have to part ways with her when they graduate.

"Sorata?"

When he stopped thinking, he saw Mashiro's face right before his eyes. They were close enough to feel each other's body heat.

"Whoa, seriously, stand back!"

Sorata quickly took a step backwards, took deep breaths and sighed while he was at it to confirm his determination. If she wanted to learn how to cook, let's teach her.

"Well then, wash your hands first."

Mashiro said OK to Sorata's instruction, opened the tap at the sink, and started to wash her hands carefully. Both of her hands became bubbly because of the handwash. When she noticed Sorata's gaze, she stopped moving and turned her head towards him.

"What?"

"Wash them well."

"OK."

Once more, Mashiro concentrated on washing her hands. She was washing hard like a raccoon washing a fruit.

Sorata opened up the fridge and checked its contents. He wanted to teach her something simple to cook. There were some eggs which were nearing their expiration date and a heap of chopped mackerel.

“I guess some rolled eggs and fried mackerel would do.”

Looking inside the fridge behind Sorata’s back, Jin decided the menu by himself.

But those dishes weren't too difficult to make, so Sorata thought that it should be OK.

“You can just match up the colors with some salad and get away with it.”

Following Jin’s advice, Sorata took out some lettuce, cucumber and some cherry tomatoes. He was aiming to make some packed lunch that had a low difficulty and danger level.

“I finished washing my hands.”

Mashiro held out her hands that were glistening with water drops. No matter when he looked at them, Mashiro’s hands were white and slender, and looked like they would snap if he held them too tightly.

“I wouldn't want to do this if I had a choice, but let’s start with rolled eggs.”

“We’re making rolled eggs.”

“You don’t need to repeat after me!”

“We’re making rolled eggs.”

It seemed like Mashiro was overflowing with eagerness. But in this situation, that was a problem.

“All right? We’re going to crack the eggs. Watch carefully. Just lightly hit the egg at the edge of the bowl and make a crack. Hold that crack with your hands and split it into two.”

As a demonstration, Sorata cracked an egg. The raw egg slid down the silver bowl. If it was Jin, he could crack an egg with one hand, but Sorata wasn’t able to do that just yet. Without a doubt, if Mashiro was to try that high-level skill, countless eggs would be crushed and sacrificed under Mashiro’s hands.

“I don’t think this is going to work, but have a go.”

Wearing a poker face that made it impossible to tell what she was thinking, Mashiro

grabbed an egg. Creeping up Sorata's legs was the uneasy feeling of Mashiro dropping the egg just by holding onto it.

“Sorata.”

“Do you want me to show you again?”

“What about the knife?”

“You don’t use one to crack an egg!”

“I want to use a knife.”

“I can’t let you use one until you level up!”

“Cooking is all about the knife.”

“Don’t spout out nonsense like「cooking is all about love」! It’s not like you've ever tried it in the first place!”

As Sorata yelled, a thundering noise came from the ceiling as if a large beast was jumping around. That said noise-source traveled down the stairs and jumped into the kitchen. The mysterious organism was obviously Misaki.

“Enjoying the atmosphere, aren’t you, Kouhai-kun!”

When Sorata saw Misaki’s appearance, he suddenly felt tired and answered like this:

“No, I don’t think I’m enjoying it as much as you are, Misaki-senpai…”

It was no secret who she was, because Misaki was wearing the outfit of the mysterious old man who gave out presents —Santa Claus, even when the season that he should appear in was still a month away. The bare legs that extended down the mini-skirt attracted his attention.

“Hoo~, Mashiron, your apron looks cute!”

Shouting「yeah~」excitedly, Misaki stuck out her thumb.

“Yeah.”

“So you won’t deny it either?”

Well, she certainly looked cute…

As these thoughts ran through Sorata's head, Misaki suddenly shouted.

“It’s decided!”

And without caring about the dumbfound Sorata, she said this.

“Start with「Mashiro」; solve it with「An antlion’s everyday life」![15]”

“Jin-senpai… what’s going on…?”

“It’s probably a riddle.”

“What for?”

“How should I know?”

Jin must’ve been used to this type of thing, because he wasn’t being sympathetic at all.

“Now, Kouhai-kun! Answer that! Answer it with the tone they are both 'XX'!”

“I’m going to get angry if it’s something like they’re both「meaningless」. Don’t worry, I’m going to take responsibility and make her clothed.[16]”

“Hoo, not bad, Kouhai-kun! Then next up is「Something empty」! Hmm, it’s decided! Start with「Something empty」, solve it with「Dragon」! Now, both of them are something! And the answer is? Du-dun!”

“When you say Dragon, you mean Akasaka right? Then both of them are「Alone」?”

“You've really improved, Kouhai-kun. There is nothing left for me to teach you! From today onwards, you may call yourself the representative of Sakurasou!”

“I don’t want to call myself that! And since when were you the representative, Misaki-senpai?”

“Huh, didn’t you know, Sorata? Misaki is the dorm president.”

He was even more surprised that such a thing as a dorm president existed.

"…Why isn't it Jin-senpai?"

"Because I'm away sleeping somewhere else 70% of the time."

"I think the reason you live in Sakurasou is to abandon that trait of yours, though."

"Then, I'll be off."

Even when a conversation was going on, Misaki didn't care and tried to leave the kitchen. While dressed up in the Santa outfit at that.

"Huh, where are you going?"

Jin asked with a 「just-in-case」 tone.

"The town hall!"

Saying that, Misaki ran outside. She must've left the front door open, because cold breeze started to come in.

"…Why the town hall?"

"Maybe they're holding a Santa conference. Now then, I'll get going as well."

Jin, who was sitting down at the round table, stood up and followed Misaki's departure. The sound of the door closing could be heard. That was something obvious, but Sorata felt somewhat safe.

With only Sorata and Mashiro inside, the kitchen suddenly became quiet.

Mashiro poked Sorata's elbow.

"Knife."

"How strong is your love for knives…"

"Strong enough to keep me awake at night."

"Ah~, all right, all right. Just use it as much as you want."

Even Mashiro should be able to cut some cucumbers. No, was it only wishful thinking that Mashiro would be able to cut cucumbers…?

He prepared a chopping board and took out two knives. Sorata cut the cucumber diagonally.

“Should I cut them in the same shape as Sorata’s?”

“I don’t want to make you do this, but… Well then, hold the knife like this…”

Mashiro held the knife. But her way of holding it was strange.

“Why are you holding it the other way around?”

“Is it wrong?”

“That’s how you would hold it if you were attacking someone! Whoaa~, don’t point it at me!”

“But I’m used to this.”

“What are you trying to cook?!”

“Do you want to be done in?”

“Don’t say such scary stuff! This is no good! Cooking is too much for you! It’s too dangerous. 「No more」[17] knife!”

“I can’t accept that.”

Mashiro pointed the tip at Sorata again.

“Don’t threaten me!”

“I didn’t.”

“Well then hold the knife normally!”

Even as she pouted her lips in dejection, Mashiro corrected her hold on the knife. With that, they were finally at the starting line.

“Now, hold the cucumber with your other hand… but don’t cut your hand.”

“I know.”

“The hand that’s not holding the knife should be like a cat’s paw. Like this, like this.”

He showed his lightly closed hand to Mashiro.

“A cat’s paw.”

Mashiro’s white and slender fingers pressed down on the cucumber. She slowly brought the knife down and cut away at the cucumber. Her fingers looked really unstable. He couldn’t bear to watch. He wanted to stop her at once, and the urge to shout bubbled up from within him.

One slice, two slices, Mashiro cut the cucumber diagonally. Her expression as she used the knife was serious, but at the same time, she appeared to be happy.

Mashiro brought a slice of cucumber to Sorata’s mouth.

“Eating it straight away?”

“Eat it.”

“Ah, yes.”

Sorata chewed thoroughly on the cucumber slice and swallowed it.

Then Mashiro looked up and down at Sorata.

“What? Did you end up getting X-ray vision?”

“Did I capture your stomach?”

“If someone can capture my stomach with that, then my stomach would be captured by cucumber farmers!”

“Cooking is profound.”

“That’s not something that a person who just started to learn how to cook should say!”

“…”

Mashiro looked at Sorata for a moment, but held the knife again. She resumed to cut the cucumber wholeheartedly.

“Hey, Shiina.”

“…”

Her tempo was slower, but she continued to cut the cucumber at a regular pace. Sorata lost himself staring at her serious expression and face.

At that moment, the regular rhythm that the knife and chopping board were playing stopped.

“Ouch.”

Instead, Mashiro’s voice came out.

“What’s wrong?”

Mashiro sucked on her right thumb. Sorata didn’t know how she used the knife, but it seemed like she cut herself on the finger of the hand that was holding the knife.

“You idiot! Here, let me take a look!”

He grabbed Mashiro's right wrist and pulled. The small cut, located towards the bottom of the second segment of the thumb, was slightly gapping. Blood drop from the wound, rolling down onto Sorata's hand.

"…!"

Mashiro was hurt… And the fact that her finger was injured was more than enough for Sorata to feel panicked.

He could feel his blood rushing instantly. The horror crept up his feet. Almost criticizing his dumbfound self, Sorata raised his voice.

"Just stay here for a bit!"

As soon as he left the room with his shaking legs, he bumped into Chihiro who was coming out from the caretaker's room. Without backing down, Sorata pinned Chihiro down to the hallway.

"Hey, what are you so horny over!"

"S-sensei! There's a big problem!"

"This situation of being pushed down by a student is quite a big problem as well."

There wasn't a hint of nervousness from Chihiro's tone.

"I-I'm sorry."

Sorata quickly stood up and helped Chihiro get up as well.

"Shiina hurt her finger!"

At this, Chihiro's expression turned a full 180 degrees.

"Where's Mashiro?!"

"In the kitchen."

Without listening to more details from Sorata, Chihiro went to the kitchen. With a desperate mind, Sorata followed her.

Chihiro checked Mashiro's wound. Sorata spoke to Chihiro's back like he was trying

to give an excuse.

“She cut herself as I was teaching her cooking…”

“Kanda.”

“Ah, yes!”

“Go to the caretaker’s room and bring a first aid kit.”

“No-; but don’t we need to take her to a hospital?!”

“The wound is nothing compared to the blood coming out from it, so just hurry up and get it!”

“Ah, yes!”

Mashiro looked at her bandaged right thumb like it was something fascinating..

“There, that should do it.”

Chihiro stood up from the kitchen table, closed the first aid kit and hit Sorata’s head with the same hand.

“Ouch! Why did you hit me!”

“To take out my anger on you of course.”

“…I-I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing so easily. I feel bad.”

“Then I’ll cancel that「sorry」just now.”

This time, his forehead was poked.

“Mashiro, don’t use your right hand for two to three days.”

At Chihiro’s warning, Mashiro thought for a while.

Now that Sorata thought about it, Mashiro did say that the manuscript for the December issue was due tomorrow.

“Can you draw the manga like that?”

“I can’t.”

“Will your manga be OK? Did you finish it?”

Mashiro shook her head.

“I still have to do the front cover.”

“Then contact your editor first. When is the December issue coming out?”

“It’s the 20th, right?”

When Sorata asked, Mashiro nodded this time.

“20th… Today is the 28th, so there still should be some time until the deadline. Some of my friends work at a publishing company and they said that you can submit it a week before the release and make it work. Well, contact her for now. You can’t do it by tomorrow, right?”

“OK.”

Mashiro stood up and went upstairs. It continued to bug him, so Sorata followed Mashiro up to her room. He dug out her mobile from the layers of printed sheets and various sketches and handed it to Mashiro.

Checking the numbers one by one, Mashiro scrolled down to her editor’s number from her contacts and called emotionlessly.

“Ayano. I hurt my finger.”

「What did you say!」

Sorata was going to leave the room, but Ayano’s voice reached even Sorata’s ears. Afterwards, she must’ve collected herself, because he couldn’t hear anything else from then onwards.

The phone call lasted for around 5 minutes and he had no idea what they were talking about, because all he heard were Mashiro’s occasional “OK”s.

“I understand… …Sorry.”

After saying that in a quiet voice, Mashiro shut her phone.

“What did she say?”

“She said「You lack awareness」.”

“Don’t say it like she was talking to me!”

“Also,「Prepare yourself for a lecture tomorrow」.”

“Let me tell you, the one who’ll be told off is you!”

“Yeah.”

The wound must’ve hurt, because Mashiro looked at her bandaged right thumb.

“Shiina.”

“What is it?”

“Give up on cooking… It would be bad if something like this happened again.”

“…”

She had even skipped gym lessons, so that she wouldn’t injure her fingers. Mashiro’s fingers had that much value. Although currently, her fingers were valued not as an artist but a mangaka; hence, she couldn’t afford to hurt her fingers, as she was currently serialized. Things had just started to open up for Mashiro, so Sorata didn’t want her to have to quit because of an injury.

He was scared of her becoming more and more distant from him but at the same time, Sorata also wanted her to move extremely far away somewhere from his heart. For he was charmed by Mashiro Shiina’s talents which he did not possess…

“It's better if I don't?”

“Huh?”

“Does Sorata want me not to cook?”

“You being hurt today is more than enough to make me say it.”

“That’s not it.”

“What’s not it?”

“I…”

“…”

“I…”

“Shiina?”

“…I don’t know.”

“What are you saying?”

“It’s enough.”

Mashiro pushed Sorata’s back and pushed him out from the room for some reason.

“H-Hey!”

The door slammed shut before he was even able to ask for the reason.

“Shiina?”

“…”

There was no reply even when he called out her name.

“Geez, what was that about?”

There really was something different with Mashiro as of late. With that feeling inside of him, Sorata thought to himself that nothing could be done and decided to go downstairs.

Part 3

The next Monday the timetables for their final exams were announced. It was set for five days, beginning from the second week of December.

A lot of sighs could be heard in the classroom because the math and physic exams were set on the third day.

However, as he looked at the distributed exam timetables, Sorata was thinking about a completely different thing.

“Stand… bow…”

The one on duty wasn’t able to hide his shock, and his muttered words barely reached Sorata’s ears as they bowed.

The rattling tables and chairs were then pushed back to the back of the class for classroom-cleaning.

“Haa… so it’s that time of the year again…”

Sorata sighed not because he was depressed at the exam revision, but because he was thinking about Mashiro, who would no doubt be baptised with a zero and be forced to sit the make-up exam again.

“You’re letting your happiness escape.”[18]

Nanami spoke to him as she moved a table next to him.

Standing by her side, Sorata also moved his table back.

“Don’t worry. I didn’t have any happiness in the first place.”

Realising how sad his own words were, Sorata sighed again.

“Oh yeah, Kanda.”

“Yeah?”

When he raised his head, Nanami was looking at Sorata with a slightly nervous expression. It seemed like she was hesitating about what to say.

“What is it?”

“Yeah… um, I’ve got something I want to say…”

Nanami was mumbling, so it was hard to hear her. It was unlike her usual self, who always spoke clearly.

“I’m listening, so whenever you’re ready.”

“…To say it here is a bit…”

After moving the table, Nanami looked towards the hallway, so Sorata said OK and left the classroom.

They moved to the vending machines by the stairs. Surprisingly, there weren’t a lot of people.

“So, what did you want to tell me?”

“Y-You know…”

Nanami’s bowed head looked flushed.

“Y-Yeah?”

Sorata also became nervous.

“It’s sort of difficult for me to say this, but could you do me a favour?”

He gulped at the weird atmosphere.

“Um… could you do the shopping chores today?”

“…Huh?”

“S-So, could you do the shopping chores? Because I have to clean after this, and my shift at work starts earlier now… I would be late if I didn’t leave straight after school.”

“So that was what you wanted to ask me?”

“It was.”

“Couldn’t you have just said that back in the classroom?”

“No.”

Nanami made an annoyed expression. Fearing that she would charge and bite him to bits if he was to argue, Sorata agreed somewhat awkwardly and accepted the shopping list from Nanami.

“I’ll make it up to you next time. Sorry… and thank you.”

“It’s all right. It’s just a visit to the shopping district anyway.”

“Ah, but… I’ll make it up to you. Prepare yourself.”

“…Why must I be threatened when I’m doing something good?”

“You know, I think I should learn a few things from Misaki-senpai.”

“Aoyama… I’m begging you, please don’t even think about becoming an alien! Aoyama is my heart’s oasis in Sakurasou.”

“What?! K-Kanda, what are you saying so suddenly… I’m on cleaning duty, so…”

With ears bright red for some reason, Nanami fled to the classroom. Watching her run away, Sorata mumbled to himself.

“What’s up with Aoyama?”

After parting ways with Aoyama, Sorata grabbed his bag from the classroom and went to the art room to pick Mashiro up. Only Mashiro remained inside the art room, which had already been cleaned up.

“Shiina, let’s go.”

“Yeah.”

Sorata called Mashiro out from the door and approached her.

Seeing the canvas on the easel, Sorata asked a naïve question.

“Is your finger OK now?”

There was a band-aid with drawings of bears stuck on the wounded right thumb from yesterday.

“It doesn’t hurt or itch.”

“The fate of those who says that sort of thing is to be defeated by the protagonist in the end.”

“You’re all bark but no bite.”

“What! Me? Who do you think I am!”

“…”

“No, I get it, so please don’t look at me with those clear eyes.”

“Why?”

“C-Cause it’s embarrassing!”

“What kind of illness is that?”

“Don’t prescribe it as an illness! Anyway, let’s go! You said your editor is coming today, right? When is she coming?”

“Around the time school ends.”

“Then we’ll be in trouble if we don’t hurry!”

“Yeah. Hurry up, Sorata.”

“The one who needs to hurry up is you!”

Yet again, Sorata dragged out the unorganised Mashiro from the art room and headed towards the shoe lockers.

“…I’ll go shopping after stopping by at the dorm.”

For now, he had to take Mashiro back to Sakurasou.

“Huh?”

“I was talking to myself.”

“But I’m here.”

“What do you mean?!”

When they went to the first floor, they ran into Jin at the shoe lockers.

As soon as he saw Sorata and Mashiro, Jin said this:

“Even today, I’m so jealous of your close relationship.”

Ignoring Jin for now, Sorata urged Mashiro to change her shoes as Sorata took out his own from the shoe shed.

“It’s so lonely seeing that Sorata is now an adult.”

He could hear Jin’s joking tone over the shoe shed.

“After staying for more than a year at Sakurasou, my mentality has strengthened regardless of my feelings.”

He expected Jin to say something else, but Jin didn’t say a word.

Waiting for a bit after putting his indoor shoes into the shoe locker, Mashiro came to him with her sneakers on. But Jin still hadn’t appeared.

Thinking that something was wrong, Sorata looked over to the 3rd year shoe lockers.

“Jin-senpai?”

He didn’t move an inch even after calling out his name. Jin stood still with his indoor shoes still on and held what seemed to be a letter from an envelope.

“T-That’s!”

Jin placed the letter back inside the envelope.

“C-Could it be a love-letter?”

“Well, something like that.”

That ambiguous reply was slightly worrying. Sorata never knew that the tradition of leaving love-letters inside shoe-lockers existed in real life. He always thought it only existed in fiction.

“You can take a look if you’re curious.”

“What? No, I can’t read that.”

“Mashiro seems to be interested, so it’s OK as long as you don’t tell anyone.”

As Jin has said, Mashiro was eyeing the love-letter warily behind Sorata’s back.

“T-Then just a bit.”

He took the white envelope. Opening the envelope sealed with a heart shaped sticker, he took out the letter inside. At that instant, Sorata's mouth dropped wide, and he froze on the spot.

On the thin sheet of paper; names, address, domicile and parents’ names were filled out carefully, with a seal stamped on.

Under the description of that paper which had the names「Jin Mitaka」and「Misaki Kamiigusa」, the heading「Marriage Registration Form」was clearly printed out.

This must’ve been why Misaki went to the town hall yesterday.

After folding the paper and putting it back into the envelope, Sorata returned the marriage registration form back to Jin.

“Congratulations on your marriage.”

“Congrats, Jin.”

“Your jokes aren’t funny, you guys.”

Not surprisingly, Jin’s expression had gone stiff. To think that things would have come this far. What a scary alien. Pouring in all of her energy and activity, Misaki has now

become a monster who survives only on her love for Jin.

“I won’t be returning to Sakurasou for a while, so I’ll leave things to you, Sorata.”

Looking tired, Jin slumped his back and walked off by himself.

“…Misaki-senpai took things too far.”

But even now, Jin was still avoiding Misaki’s feelings. He was continuously avoiding her. Jin’s fleeing skills were to be commended.

“Kouhai-kun!”

“Whoa!”

While he was in thought, a soft creature suddenly jumped on his back. Unable to bear the weight, his knees gave out.

“Whoa~, get off me, Misaki-senpai!”

Misaki, who had her arms around his neck, wouldn’t let go no matter how much Sorata screamed. The presence of her breasts on his back was out of this world, and combined with Misaki’s breath on his neck, he was about to lose himself. On top of that, she even smelled nice.

“What did Jin say?”

“Pardon?”

“About that love-letter in the shoe locker! You read it as well, right, Kouhai-kun?”

“…Ahh, were you watching?"

“Yep, from that shadow near the shoe lockers over there!”

Pushing Sorata aside, Misaki jumped off him. Dusting his knees, Sorata also stood up.

“I think he was surprised…”

“I was also surprised.”

Mashiro commented her thoughts.

“Hm~mm… wasn’t that enough.”

Misaki talked in an unusually low voice.

“Why won’t Jin realise that I’m being serious…”

Misaki looked at the direction that Jin had already disappeared to, like she was trying to chase after him.

“Even when I try to express my feelings… he always treats it as a joke…”

Sorata was unable to say anything and lightly bit on his lower lips.

“All right. I’ll be more courageous next time! Ohh~!”

Misaki threw an uppercut in midair.

What on earth was she going to do next…. Surely there wouldn’t be anything else that she could do after the marriage registration form…

After that, Misaki started to sing…

“The bear is berry~, berry bearable~”

…A mysterious song and ran off.

Only silence remained.

“Shiina.”

“Yeah?”

“Should we get going as well?”

“Yeah.”

Holding off the shopping chore that he accepted from Nanami, Sorata used the usual path that he took to school and walked back to Sakurasou with Mashiro.

With nervousness, he opened the letterbox outside the dorm. It was empty inside, but the letter for「Let’s Make A Game」should arrive soon.

As he was feeling both dejected and grateful, he sensed the sound of footsteps stopping right behind them.

“Hi.”

When Sorata turned around, he saw Mashiro’s editor —a woman in her mid 20s, Ayano Iida. She wore a warm knee-short beige skirt, a matching jacket and a large tote bag on her shoulders. Her lightly wavy hair swayed as she greeted them.

“Ah, hello.”

This was his third time meeting Ayano. He met her once during the summer and once during the production of Nyaboron as she had to visit Sakurasou, so he was already familiar with her. She usually had a gentle expression, but today, understandably, her expression was stern.

“Ayano…”

Mashiro looked slightly intimidated.

“Umm, it’s not good to talk while we’re standing, so let’s go inside.”

Sorata took the lead and suggested Mashiro and Ayano to go inside Sakurasou. After taking his shoes off at the front door, Sorata handed over a pair of guest slippers to Ayano.

“Thanks.”

“Where do you want to have the talk? If you prefer a larger area, you can use the dining area.”

Even when Sorata said that, Ayano wordlessly looked at Mashiro’s right hand.

“Ah, um, it seems to be already better.”

Mashiro didn’t say a thing, so Sorata answered in her place.

“I see. Then could we go to Shiina’s room? I want to check the manuscript as well.”

“…Yes.”

Ayano followed Mashiro upstairs. And Sorata saw them go up from the first floor. If they were going to discuss about work, then Sorata didn't need to go with them; it would be weird for him to take part in it.

Thinking that it would take a while, he decided to go shopping first. When Sorata went inside his room thinking that he should get changed into casual clothes, his phone started to ring inside his pocket.

The number displayed on the screen was his home-phone number. It was probably his sister Yuuko.

"Hello?"

When he answered the phone, a voice screamed out.

「I WANT YOU, ONII-CHAN[19], AS MY CHRISTMAS PRESENT!」

It was his sister Yuuko as expected. There was no way that he would mistake that voice with someone else's and the only person in the entire universe who called him 「Onii-chan」 was his sister Yuuko. She must be calling after feeling lonely again.

"Who are you looking for? I think you have the wrong person."

Sorata grabbed his nose and altered his voice and talked in an adult-like manner.

「What?! Ah, I-I'm sorry! I'm sorry! My bad!」

Apologising a number of times out of embarrassment, Yuuko hung up.

When he waited for a while, she didn't call back. The phone rang again when he was about to close his phone thinking that his sister had given up.

"Yeah, what is it, Yuuko?"

「What should I do, Onii-chan! It's a mystery! I called with the number registered under your name, but it got connected to someone else.」

"Hm~m. It's not that surprising. The fairies living inside the phone lines must've made a mistake."

「Onii-chan, please tell those fairies to do their work properly!」

“OK, I’ll make sure to tell them next time.”

「But I won’t be tricked by a lie like that! Now that I think about it, that was you just now, wasn’t it?!'

“Ah, did I get found out?”

「Even I know that the world of adults is full of deception.」

“Really? Yuuko is now an adult, huh. So, what’s up?”

「I found out something very surprising, Onii-chan.」

“Really? That’s surprising.”

「But I haven’t said a thing yet~! You know, it’s already been a year and eight months since you moved out, but you haven’t called me first even once! Not even once! After realising that, I thought I should call and lecture you.」

“Well, that’s because I don’t have the need to call.”

「Shock! If there isn’t one, then make one!」

“But the call is a waste of money.”

「You’ve been so cold lately.」

“Can we talk about that some other time? I’m setting up an ambush, so I’ve got my hands full.”

「What kind of ambush?」

“That's where you're supposed to say「Yeah right, you’re just probably busy sleeping」and play along with me.”

Is it all right for her to be so innocent? No, maybe it's just stupidity… She’ll be a high school student starting from next year, yet she seemed so young.

「Anyways! My heart has been frozen solid because of your coldness. So I’m yearning for you for my Christmas present!」

“What do you mean「yearning」! You’re not playing your character right. And what are

you going to do even if you do get me?"

「I'm going to spend a wonderful night!」

"Things would become sour if dad was to hear that, so keep your voice down when you're saying those things. And going back for Christmas is a bit difficult."

Since Mashiro was certainly going to receive a big fat zero for her final exams and would have to stay back for make-up exams. And just like the summer holidays, Sorata's winter holidays wouldn't start until Mashiro passes her exams.

The make-up exams weren't the issue, as Mashiro could memorise the correct answers, but it was Sorata who had to take her to school and back.

「What about New Year's Eve? You'll come back home for the winter holidays right?」

"Huh? Ahh… that's right. What should I do?"

Going back to his home in Fukuoka wasn't much of a problem, but to do that, there was a big problem. No, it was more like he had to bring back a huge baggage.

It was when… Chihiro told him this when he wanted to go back home.

If you're going to go back home, take Mashiro with you.

She said it with a serious looking face. Unfortunately, he could see it in her eyes that she wasn't kidding; she was 100% serious.

「Onii-chan? Are you listening to me?」

"Ahh, sorry. I had to think about my life for a bit. But I don't think it'll be easy to go back since I have to look after all these cats."

「I heard that excuse during the summer as well!」

"The situation won't change just because it's winter now."

「It's OK! The cats will loaf around a kotatsu[20]!」

"Umm, I have no idea what you mean."

「Anyways! You have to come back during the winter break! If you don't, I'm going to marry you!」

"You mean you're going to break our ties, not marriage! And we're blood siblings!"

「Soon, a setting will be revealed that we're actually strangers!」

"I have failed at raising you… I am sorry, sister."

「You promised! You have to come back!」

"I'll consider it with a positive mindset. Then see you later."

「Ah, wait…」

He closed his phone and ended the call.

"…Sister, where are you trying to go?"

Even though he said that, he actually wanted to spend the end of the year back at home. What should he do… the problem lied with Mashiro. No, Mashiro could return to England and spend the end of the year with her parents. Over that wide sea was her friend Rita.

"But she has her manga serialisation."

Thinking about it that way, he felt like things were getting more complicated. It seemed like he would have to spend the New Year's Eve in Sakurasou…

"Well, I can always decide after hearing what Shiina wants to do."

Making up his mind, Sorata quickly got changed.

Dealing with Yuuko took up too much of his time. Since the shopping district closed around 5 or 6 o'clock, he couldn't dilly-dally.

From his uniform that was hanging on the hanger, he took out the shopping list he received from Nanami and left his room.

As he was putting on his shoes at the front door, Ayano came downstairs by herself. It didn't seem like Mashiro was coming.

“The lecturing is already over? What about Shiina?”

“She started on the manuscript…”

Did Ayano look troubled because Mashiro switched to her concentration mode before Ayano could finish her lecture?

“Is Mashiro’s finger really OK?”

He wanted to believe that it was, since he already saw her holding a brush after school, but he still was very concerned about it.

“I checked it over from various angles, and I think it’s OK. She said that it doesn’t hurt or feel discomforted.”

“I see…”

“Do you think I’m forcing her to draw?”

“N-No, I’m sorry if I sounded that way.”

Ayano smiled to reassure Sorata that she was only kidding and changed into her shoes after taking the slippers off.

“Huh? Are you leaving already?”

“Seeing her in that state, I think she can finish it by today.”

“I see.”

“…”

When Sorata looked away while thinking about something, Ayano quietly looked at him.

“W-What’s the matter?”

“Sorata, do you have some time?”

“Huh? Me?”

“I’ve got a few things that I wanted to ask you… ah, you don’t need to be that

surprised."

"Then, I need to go shopping at the shopping district, so could we talk while we walk?"

"Sure. We can do that."

He walked up the modest slope with Ayano. Her walking pace was surprisingly fast. Or did it only seem like that because he grew used to Mashiro's slow speed?

"I want to hear your honest opinion."

"Yes?"

"What do you think about Shiina these days?"

"What do you mean, what…"

"For example, you think she has gotten pretty, cute or huggable, I would be grateful if you could tell me your honest thoughts."

"What exactly do you want to hear from me…"

"Jokes aside."

"…Don't joke around with such a serious expression! I almost spilled the beans!"

"Hm~m, I failed, huh. I could've heard some realistic truthful feelings of a high schooler."

"That's also a joke, right?"

"Ah, no, that was serious."

Was this what they referred to as an adult's pace? Sorata was at loss of what to do because he couldn't wrap his head around it.

"But when you say these days, what do you mean?"

"Hm~m, let's see."

Ayano curled her lips upwards and fell into her thoughts. She must've applied

something on her lips because they glistened. Those sexy lips of hers moved again.

“When I first met her, Shiina had an expression of an artist.”

“…”

“Her eyes were crystal clear. I remember being overwhelmed by her uniqueness when I sat across her. When she was looking at me, it felt like she wasn’t actually looking at me… That aspect of her left quite an impact on me.”

“That’s how I felt when I first met her as well.”

Well, in Sorata’s case, he mistook her for a detailed, weak person who would break unless protected…

“But you know… Shiina has been making some ordinary girl’s expression lately.”

“Ordinary?”

“Don’t you think so, Sorata?”

“I…”

Mashiro certainly was different these days. Sorata tried not to think too deeply into the matter. It was because he didn’t think he would be able to understand her in the first place.

“I feel… a bit different… no, maybe completely different… For me, I feel uneasy whenever I look at Shiina.”

He tried to express his formless expressions into words —trying to search the bottom of his heart to find out what his own heart was feeling….

“Should I say I feel bad… no, discomfort? That’s not it either… Umm, I… think I feel a bit restless.”

Ahh, that’s right. The feeling that he was feeling was one of instinctive nervousness. He wouldn’t be able to give a clear answer if someone asked him why, but he did feel that something wasn’t right with Mashiro.

“That’s quite a helpful standpoint.”

“Before, all she thought about was manga and I didn’t think she was interested in anything else, so it’s weird for her to say that she wants to learn how to cook. She was never like that before —just sitting around dazed out… I feel like that the current Shiina isn’t the true her.”

That small nervousness slowly expanded in Sorata’s head.

“So that’s how you see things to be.”

“Isn’t that how you see her, Iida?”

“That’s right. I think the current Shiina is ordinary.”

“What?”

Sorata wasn’t expecting to hear that.

“Don’t get me wrong, but I think she was strange until now.”

“That’s… certainly true.”

“So I feel a bit hesitant.”

“About the current Shiina?”

“That’s right. For Shiina who has only studied drawing for her entire life, I think it’s very precious for her to experience「Normality」through her high school life. But as an editor, I think that’s going to make Shiina lose her uniqueness. I’m probably thinking too much into it though. Her experience and talents wouldn’t disappear now.”

“I think I… sort of get it.”

While Mashiro’s talents were amazing, her ability to draw on a global level was thanks to her tireless training when she was younger and her amazing passion. It was different to cramming or learning quickly. All of her drawing techniques and sensitivity flows through Mashiro’s blood after years of practice. She wouldn’t lose that so quickly.

“What do you think, Sorata?”

“What do you mean?”

“Which Shiina do you like? Ah, or are you going to say that you like both sides of her?”

“W-What are you saying?”

“It’s cute how you’re blushing.”

Ayano laughed playfully.

“I-I… prefer the previous Shiina.”

Hearing Sorata’s response, Ayano laughed straight away.

“Prefer… Why would that be?”

She asked again.

“After seeing Shiina’s amazing skills… I felt that I should do something as well and I feel attracted to that type of existence. Because Shiina’s unwavering will is so much greater than mine…”

“I see, so that’s why you feel uneasy watching Shiina taking interest in something else. And that’s why you’re nervous.”

“That’s…”

When Sorata heard the words that he didn’t even realise himself, he tried to deny it by instinct but no words came out.

“And the young ones will go through the path of throne.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m just saying that the innocence of the young ones, who chase after a goal, makes me feel old.”

“But you’re still young, Iida.”

“That type of innocent phrase doesn’t suit Sorata.”

“I didn’t mean it that way! Don’t treat me like Jin-senpai.”

“Ah~, yes, you can certainly feel the abrasive nature from Mitaka. But yeah… I see.”

It seemed like Ayano accepted something.

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s impossible not to be influenced in some way while living in a fun place like Sakurasou. I would have wished for a high school life like yours, if I could have.”

“…Let me tell you, Sakurasou is a den of problem kids.”

“That’s thrilling.”

“While it’s true that every day is not boring, I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“I suppose I can never stop wishing for the impossible.”

After a while, Sorata and Ayano arrived at the station.

“Ah, that’s right. I forgot something important.”

As she was about to go through the gates, Ayano stopped, went back to Sorata and took out an A4 sheet of paper from her tote bag.

On the top it said「End-of-Year Party Notice」.

The date was set for the 24th of next month. It seemed like it was held on Christmas Eve from 7:00 p.m. at a hotel event-hall in the city. Seeing this, Sorata’s chest hurt — the reality of Mashiro being a mangaka hit him hard. Just now, he wanted to be strong enough to not pale in comparison to Mashiro, but his chest hurt seeing how strong she was. He thought that he was contradicting himself, but that was the true Sorata.

“I forgot to give this to Shiina, so could you please pass it to her?”

“Ah, yes.”

“I’ll call again sometime, but please tell her that she needs to attend.”

“Yes.”

“Even the editor-in-chief wants to meet Shiina so much. Since this is a good opportunity.”

“I completely understand.”

“Then thanks for talking to me about various things.”

Waving her hand, Ayano passed through the gates. After seeing her figure disappear, Sorata walked towards the shopping district to get the groceries. He folded the party notice and put it in his pocket.

The sun had set and the stars were shining when Sorata finished shopping and returned to Sakurasou with bags filled with groceries in both of his hands.

Holding the bags, he looked inside the letter box. He saw the familiar envelope from 「Let’s Make A Game」 organisers. He rushed inside and dropped off the bags before returning to take the envelope from the letter box.

Unable to wait until he went back in, Sorata violently opened the envelope up at the front door.

A thin sheet of paper.

He didn’t know if he passed or failed yet. Because either way, the envelope always had a single page.

He unfolded the thrice folded paper.

Without reading the entire letter, Sorata crumpled the paper.

—It is our regret to inform you that you were not successful this…

“Damn it!”

He slammed his head onto the front door. He failed again.

Clenching his mouth tightly shut, he slowly swallowed his frustration. Sorata’s way of dealing with the failed notice had definitely changed over the numerous failed attempts.

At the start, he accepted it gracefully and thought that he should channel that result as a motivation for the next attempt. But with each cycle, his anger grew larger, and today, his frustration reached a particularly high level.

No good would come out of being angry. The result was all that mattered. Sorata's failure was his own fault. He had to accept the result and use the experience for the next attempt.

Let's cool down first. Thinking that, Sorata opened the crumpled letter. He used too much strength and the paper ripped. At such a small issue, his frustration grew again.

This time, Sorata crumpled the letter into a ball and threw it away. Even after doing so, he was still frustrated. He was disgusted at his immature self.

Then Mashiro came out from the kitchen after hearing Sorata's voice.

"Sorata."

Seeing her, Sorata pulled a stressful expression. Mashiro was wearing an apron on top of her uniform and was holding a kitchen knife and a cucumber in her hands.

"What are you doing."

His emotions suddenly exploded within him.

"Cooking."

"And your manuscript?"

"It's finished."

"And what are you doing because it's finished?"

He clenched his fist from the stress.

"Cooking."

"Did you forget that you weren't able to finish your manuscript yesterday because you got hurt?!"

"…"

"What will you do if you hurt your finger again and it doesn't get better in a day or two?!"

With his anger getting the better of him, Sorata couldn't hold himself back.

“I’ll be careful.”

“Are you kidding? Just focus on your manga!”

“I finished the manuscript.”

“You used to try harder before! You used to concentrate on making your manga even slightly better!”

“…”

“If you have the talent, then don’t waste it!”

“…That’s…”

“Because there are lots of people who would love to be serialised instead!”

“If you say that…”

“Then what?”

“If you say that, I’m leaving first!”

He didn’t know what she meant, but Mashiro’s words were more than enough for Sorata to stop thinking. It was the first time to hear Mashiro yell like that…

“It’s all Sorata’s fault.”

“What are you saying… what the hell…”

“Get out.”

“I’m asking, what are you saying?”

“I don’t know.”

“What the hell!”

“You don’t know how I feel.”

“What feeling?!”

“Tell me…”

“Why should I care?!”

“Tell me, Sorata!”

When Mashiro stared at Sorata with unwavering eyes, Sorata was left speechless.

At that moment, the front door opened and Chihiro walked in grumbling.

“Ha~, I’m so tired again… but what are you guys doing at the door?”

It was obvious that Chihiro would ask, as Sorata stood at near the door and Mashiro was holding a cucumber and a knife in her hands.

“Huh? Are you guys having a fight without my permission? If you don’t let me know beforehand, then I won’t be able to spectate.”

“Don’t make fun of other people's misery.”

Sorata frostily replied. Yet Chihiro didn’t seem to care at all.

“Well, whatever. But Mashiro, you’re banned to use the knife for a while.”

Chihiro quickly took off her shoes and took the knife and cucumber from Mashiro.

“Chihiro, I…”

“You’re not an ordinary girl so don’t get so impatient.”

Was she able to say such a thing because she was an educator, or because she was Mashiro’s cousin? No, maybe it was her personality itself.

“…I understand.”

Unwillingly, Mashiro agreed with Chihiro. Without saying a word to Sorata, she disappeared upstairs.

“Kanda, you’re in the way, so don’t just stand there dumbfounded and go to your room.”

Sorata didn’t have the energy to reply to Chihiro's arrogant words.

—If you say that, I'm leaving first!

For his head was full of Mashiro's emotional outburst.

"What the hell…"

Part 4

Sorata decided to stop studying programming for the night and laid down on his bed, looking up at the ceiling.

Ignoring the cats that were playing near him, he kept thinking about Mashiro.

“Was I just taking out my anger on her…”

He didn’t think so. Regardless of the game proposal result, he couldn’t accept Mashiro cooking when there was a chance she could hurt herself again.

He would’ve approached the situation differently, but he believed that he had done the right thing this time.

“I won’t apologise first.”

He wasn’t going to give in this time.

That’s how upset he was at Mashiro’s actions.

He felt like she was making fun of him. He felt like Mashiro didn’t value the results of her countless hours of hard work. Why wasn’t she grateful about being able to be serialised in a magazine… Although the genre was different, Mashiro had what Sorata wanted.

Even now, thinking about it made him want to jump up and down screaming.

“Kouhai-kun, the bath is free~.”

Misaki informed him from the hallway.

“Ah, OK.”

He replied and stood up. When he did, he heard something rustle from the pocket of his pants.

When he took out the contents of his pocket, it turned out to be the letter that he received from Ayano. He had forgotten to give it to Mashiro.

He skimmed over the details once more. The party was going to be held on the 24th of December at 7:00 p.m. at a hotel in the city.

At that moment, he heard a knock on his door.

“Kanda, are you inside?”

“Yeah.”

Opening the door gently, Nanami poked her head in and asked.

“Do you have spare time?”

“Sure.”

“OK.”

Answering with one word, Nanami entered his room. She shut the door behind her.

“Thanks for swapping the shopping duty for me today.”

“Did you come just to thank me? You’re so nice.”

“There is that, but there’s also something else.”

“What is it?”

“Would you go see this with me?”

What Nanami held out was the tickets she received from Jin before. She did say that those were very rare, but Sorata, who knew nothing about the play industry, didn’t know how valuable they were.

“Since I have two tickets, you see.”

“Why are you being so polite all of a sudden?”

“If I go by myself, then a ticket will remain.”

“Well, that’s obvious.”

“A-And it’s not like I’ve got someone to go with either…”

“That’s going to be lonely…”

“Kanda, why are you nit-picking like that?”

“Sorry… I’m just not in a good mood today.”

“…Did something happen?”

“Not really, but…”

Although something did actually happen, he lied because he was unsure about how he could express himself. Well, she’ll find out anyway even if he kept his mouth shut, because they did live in a dorm…

“Something doesn’t seem right, but OK. So back to the play, it’s on the 24th next month. And since you swapped the chores for me, I’ll treat you to a meal at least.”

“Treat me? You don’t really need to do that.”

“So, what do you say?”

Nanami had her eyes slightly open as she asked.

“Sure.”

“Huh?”

“Why are you surprised?”

“B-Because it’s on the 24th. Are you sure you can go with me?”

“I think for this year, Misaki-senpai and Jin-senpai want to spend the time together, Shiina will go to an end-of-year party held by her publisher and Akasaka will think of the day as nothing more than the start of the winter holidays, so it should be OK.”

“I-I see.”

“And if I stay at Sakurasou, I think I’ll have to put up with Chihiro cursing Christmas.”

“I see.”

“Yeah.”

“Then it’s a promise.”

“Sure.”

“You promised.”

“If you can’t trust me that much, then do you want to do a pinky promise?”

“…Yeah.”

“No, I was joking.”

“Come on.”

Something was different about Nanami today. She actually held out her pinky finger and Sorata also did the same on a whim. It was both embarrassing and exciting to do this with a female classmate.

“Promise.”

“Yeah, promise.”

Their entwined fingers finally came apart. Nanami continued to keep her pinky wrapped around with her other hand as she left the room.

With tomorrow, November will be coming to an end. Christmas, which he thought was going to be a long time away, was surprisingly near when Sorata looked at his calendar in his room.

But he still couldn’t believe that the year would be over in just a month’s time.

Chapter 4 - On Christmas Eve

Part 1

“Kouhai-kun! We need to talk about something!”

“Really?”

“Jin won’t yield to the rain or wind no matter what I try!”

“…I see.”

“What should I do now?”

“Can't this conversation wait until I get out of the toilet first?”

That’s right, they were in Sakurasou's toilet. Sorata and Misaki were facing each other in that tight space.

At this rate, he would pull down his pants if he had to.

“It can’t! Because it’s something urgent!”

“My bowels are quite urgent as well!”

“I can’t wait any longer!”

“Neither can I! Just hurry up and get out!”

Something like this was nothing but ordinary in Sakurasou. If he was to file a suit against the treatment that he received, three years of waiting for legal actions would come and go just like that.

After spending 10 whole minutes convincing the alien to get out, Sorata was finally able to do his business at his leisure in the toilet intended for a single person, like it was supposed to be.

“Haa.”

Sighing, he washed his hands at the basin. When he opened the tap, the cold bite of the water reminded him that it was already winter.

It was obvious that it was getting cold. Today was the 10th of December. The final exams would end today, and there wasn't much time left until the end of the year.

Today in particular, when it really started to get cold, there were a lot of students who were tightly dressed in gloves, scarves, and coats while breathing out white mist.

Right now, with the sun set, it was even colder. The wooden flooring was cold too and one needed some courage if they were to walk on it barefoot. The season of trials had arrived at the old Sakurasou building.

While Sorata was about to go upstairs to counsel Misaki while repeating「cold, cold」under his breath, he caught a glimpse of a human's shadow out of the corner of his eyes.

He stopped and looked around. It was the pajama-clad Mashiro in front of Sorata's room. She was merely standing motionless in front of it. Up until now, she used to barge in without knocking, but something was different this time .

Sorata was well aware of the cause and the reason as to why she came to act that way. It started from the day after Mashiro cut herself with the knife. They had fought after Mashiro tried to cook again, even after her editor Ayano warned her not to. That was the cause.

Even after nearly two weeks, Sorata was still unable to resolve his feelings from that event. He just couldn't forgive Mashiro, who did not realise the value of her own fingers that she couldn't afford getting injured, as she needed them to draw manga.

—I didn't say anything wrong.

That thought grew stronger and stronger each day.

"Shiina."

When Sorata called out her name, Mashiro looked towards him with a slightly surprised expression.

"What's up?"

"…I want to eat baumkuchen."

Without replying, Sorata went to the kitchen. After taking out a baumkuchen from their

reserve in the fridge, he handed it to Mashiro who had followed after him.

Mashiro didn't try to eat it straight away, but looked into Sorata's eyes like she wanted to say something while holding the baumkuchen packaging in her hands.

"Do you have something to say?"

"Thank you."

"…No problem."

"…Sorata."

"What?"

"Are you angry?"

"…I'm not."

"Liar, you're angry."

"I'm not."

"…"

It seemed like Mashiro couldn't accept it. Nevertheless, she did not try to ask once more.

"Sorry."

"For what?"

"…"

"If you don't know, then don't apologise."

"Because Sorata is angry."

"I told you that I'm not angry!"

When he raised his voice so suddenly, Mashiro took a step backwards. Holding the baumkuchen package, she fled from the kitchen.

“If you make a scary expression like that, then you look angry no matter how one looks at it.”

As soon as Mashiro left, Jin took her place. He was wearing a short coat and pants, which accentuated his good fashion sense, and a scarf around his neck. It looked like he was about to go out. Since today was a Friday, he should be going to the race queen Suzune.

When the culture festival season ended, Jin returned to his usual life style as the king of sleepovers. He would be lucky to see Jin once in a week these days.

“…How do I look to you, Jin-senpai?”

“Would you be satisfied if I said that you look like a terrible person?”

“I think so as well… I’m such a terrible person… I know that, but I can’t accept it. When Shiina does something out of her character after she had worked so hard to become a mangaka and get serialised… it feels like she’s making fun of me.”

“But that’s all in your head.”

He expected Jin to agree with him, but Jin said that that naturally.

“Do you think that someone would draw manga until they fall asleep, just for a hobby? Do you think a world renowned painter would just quit to draw manga? You should know that better than anyone else.”

What Jin was saying was certainly true.

“…But I just don’t get Shiina these days.”

“If you think that way, then shouldn't you do something about it?”

After taking out a bottle of water from the fridge and pouring himself a cup, Jin emptied it in one gulp.

“What do you mean by that?”

Jin placed his hand on Sorata’s shoulder, as he was about to leave, and lightly spoke:

“—Just realise it already.”

“Are you saying that I’m wrong?”

“You don't even know your own feelings.”

“What?”

“Being angry for the past two weeks means that you are serious about Mashiro being a mangaka, right?”

“…”

“But that’s the opposite of wanting to cheer her on. If you were anything like before, then you would actually feel glad about the current Mashiro.”

“I…”

Was it really like what Jin had said? He wasn’t sure. Even now he thought that Mashiro’s talents were blinding. Sometimes, it was painful to watch. He didn’t think that aspect had changed since April —when Mashiro came to Sakurasou.

So he wasn’t able to completely accept what Jin was saying.

“Well, do try to get along.”

Waving his hand lightly, Jin went outside. Inside the kitchen, only Sorata remained with his unresolved feelings.

Just realise it already.

He recalled Jin’s words again in his head.

“If that was possible, then I wouldn’t have to suffer like this…”

After seeing Jin go, Sorata went upstairs in order to counsel Misaki. The room just up the stairs was Room 201 - Misaki’s room.

On the door was a name plate which read「My Room」. As expected of the alien. The world revolved around Misaki.

But even for her, things weren't going as expected. Today's counseling was exactly about that. He really thought that Misaki was asking the wrong person for help, but he couldn't just ignore her. It didn't take a genius to figure out that Misaki wouldn't let go of Sorata, even if he rejected her.

"I'm not in a position where I can counsel others though…"

As he sighed in complaint, someone spoke behind him.

"Kanda, what are you doing in front of Senpai's door?"

Nanami walked up the stairs and eyed Sorata like he was a suspicious person. The air outside was cold, so Nanami's cheeks were slightly red. It seemed like she just came back from her part-time job.

"…What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Something that you shouldn't do as a human being."

"I'm not!"

"Then what is it? I know that you need to look after Mashiro, so that can't be helped. But do remember that the second floor is off limits for males."

"…Misaki-senpai asked me to counsel her."

"Counsel?"

Seeing Nanami's face, Sorata came up with a good idea.

"Ah, that's right. Aoyama, do you have some time?"

"I do, but I won't."

"Why not?!"

"Because it feels like I'm going to get caught up in this."

She was quite sharp on the uptake. No, did her defense mechanism develop after living in Sakurasou?

"I've reached my limits of helping Misaki-senpai! Please!"

“I can’t help her either.”

“Please do something!”

He clapped his hands together and begged to Nanami.

“OK, but only if we're listening to her together.”

“You’re a life saver, Aoyama.”

“I want to ask Kamiigusa-senpai something anyway.”

“Something you want to ask her?”

“…It’s a secret from Kanda.”

“Hearing that makes me want to find out even more.”

“Don’t you need to mind your own business?”

“I’m writing up a game proposal weekly and I’m doing my programming studies as well.”

But the results were not as comforting, as he continuously received failure notices and he was stuck on programming for a few months because he couldn’t understand some concepts... But there was some progress and Sorata was able to reread his previous game proposals. The game proposal he was working on now was actually based on a rhythm battle game idea that he had submitted before but didn’t pass the first stage.

“Not that, but about Mashiro.”

“I… already knew that.”

Sorata already knew that he had to do something about the situation. He was messing up the mood in the dorm after all…

“Well, that’s good…”

As they were talking, Room 201’s door opened from inside and Misaki poked her head out.

“Ah, Nanamin, welcome!”

"…I'm back."

Nanami answered, albeit timidly.

"Then let's hurry up and get our discussion on life going till morning!"

"No, please make it short!"

"No problem! I already prepared the energy drinks!"

What Misaki took out were the special potions that took them beyond their limits during the culture festival. It gave them incredible amounts of energy after drinking it, but after the effect wears off, there was a setback of 36 hours of sleep….

Declaring that he will never drink that energy drink again, Sorata entered Misaki's room for the first time in a while.

There were still stacks of paper in the room. On the wide desk, there were three LCD screens and a drawing tablet. Underneath the table were four PCs in total. Also, there was a printer and a scanner on a side table next to it. At first glance, it didn't look like a female high school student's room at all.

However, there were cute clothes (which looked like they would suit Misaki quite well) hanging on the opposite side of the high tech set up, so it displayed a completely different world to the desk side.

"Now, now. Sit, sit!"

Sorata and Nanami sat next to each other on the bed offered by Misaki. When his eyes met Nanami's, who was sitting right next to him, Nanami coughed and moved slightly away from Sorata.

"Do you hate me that much?"

"…This is the suitable distance between a boy and a girl."

Sitting up straight and looking forward, Nanami truly sat like an honor student. Sitting at the edge of his view, Misaki sat at the table and scribbled on some paper placed on top of a light-box with a pencil. Looking at the paper, it seemed like she was sketching a high school student.

“So, how do you think I can convey my feelings to Jin?”

Misaki asked while moving her hand. She intended to talk while she worked. When she completed a page, she placed another sheet on top of it.

“I wonder. Let’s go over the situation first. What did you try so far, senpai?”

“The great packed lunch confession plan.”

That was the time when she wrote the word「LOVE」on top of rice with salmon flakes and minced chicken.

“That was completely ignored…”

Sorata was there when it happened, but Jin didn’t show any hint of surprise.

“And after that was the shoe locker, love-letter plan!”

“You’re talking about the registration form…”

“When you say registration form… you mean *that* registration?!”

Nanami’s expression said that she couldn’t believe it.

“Yes, *that* registration. The form where you become officially wedded if you hand it in at the town hall. All of the spaces were filled out with the stamps and everything. So in short, it was ready to be submitted.”

“…Woaah!”

Nanami exclaimed without knowing how else to react.

“That’s not all, Aoyama. Misaki-senpai even wrapped herself in a ribbon and presented herself to Jin for his birthday this year.”

“…So there really are people who do that type of things.”

“Last year, I heard that she decorated herself with cream and asked Jin to eat her.”

At that time, Sorata was still living in the normal dorms, so he only heard about it from Jin… but Jin probably wasn’t dramatizing it at all. In fact, it was most likely that Jin had censored it for Sorata’s sake.

“What else did you do?”

Nanami carefully asked.

“Well~, I called him out to the back of the school and confessed to him.”

“And the result?”

“He said「Let’s go back inside, it’s cold」!”

She was brilliantly ignored.

“And I tried to confess to him behind the gymnasium!”

“I’ll ask just in case, so the result was?”

“He said「I’m sleepy, let’s go back to class」!”

She was completely ignored.

“And you know, I even called him out to the rooftop and confessed!”

“Did he say「I’m hungry, let’s go back to class」?”

“How did you know, Kouhai-kun?!”

It seemed like Misaki was already trying ways that Sorata didn’t know about. Jin did mention that Misaki had been very active lately… so this was what he meant back then.

“…And Mitaka-senpai heard all of that?”

“Yeah.”

“But the results were…”

“I tried, but they were unfortunate!”

Nanami groaned as she started to think.

“…I think Mitaka-senpai should’ve figured out Kamiigusa-senpai’s feelings by now.”

“He thinks that I’m only fooling around! What should I do?”

Nanami started to think again.

“Why don’t you try confessing in a way which cannot be taken as a joke?”

“That’s the only way… right? Or meet Jin-senpai head on in a situation where he wouldn’t be able to escape…”

Sorata and Nanami could only come to the same conclusion.

“For example?”

It was difficult to answer that. Misaki had already employed so many different methods. Yet Jin avoided all of her attempts. A flimsy plan wasn’t going to work.

While Sorata was desperately trying to come up with something, Misaki finished drawing and scanned what she drew after turning on the computer.

She set the images on continuous playback and after editing it with another pre-made clip, she made a short animation clip.

Nanami looked at her in admiration.

“How cool…”

“Yeah.”

Sorata nodded his head and agreed to that statement. Although it was not coloured yet, the flow of the characters was so smooth that it appeared as if the characters had a life of their own. He didn’t think that Misaki would be able to work on something aside from Jin’s script that she received in summer.

“Is this the script?”

Nanami picked up a pile of A4 paper near her foot on the floor.

“Jin wrote it.”

Misaki proudly said what both Sorata and Nanami knew.

“I animated half of it already, so do you want to have a look?”

Sorata and Nanami quietly nodded their heads at the same time.

Following the animation clip that Misaki played and the script that Nanami was flipping through, they tried to understand the movements and dialogues by the atmosphere.

The setting was set up north, where it was famous for heavy snowfall. During the winter, the whole town would be covered in white snow.

The main characters were a male and a female high school student who were born and raised up in that town. Those two were childhood friends and they had started dating each other when they entered their 3rd year. The story began with the confession scene.

The anime depicted their simple everyday life after they started to date.

Going to school together in the morning, when the girlfriend visited his house and talking about a TV show they watched yesterday.

Even during their classes, they broke out in laughter whenever their eyes met and they were told off by their teacher. Their classmates called them the lovey-dovey couple, but they enjoyed being called that.

They ate their lunch together on the rooftop. Even as they complained about the cold, neither of them wanted to come down from the rooftop.

While doing their homework after school in the library, they grew tired of studying and went outside and had a snowball fight. In the end, they became exhausted and laid on the snow, stargazing.

—Let's be together forever.

They promised each other.

But the boy said that he will apply for Tokyo University. The girl already said that she will remain in the country side.

When Sorata wondered what was going to happen next, the animation finished.

"That's it so far. How is it?"

When Misaki asked for their opinion, Sorata wasn't able to give a reply straight away. He felt a heavy pressure on his shoulders and stomach, so he was unable to make a sound even when he opened his mouth.

The atmosphere was different to Jin's past works. His first work was a sci-fi and the next one was another visually flashy work.

Compared to those, this work was focused on people's sentimental emotions and Sorata could feel that this story was based off of Jin and Misaki, no matter how he looked at it.

Misaki's high quality animation added to the effect and made Sorata's heart ache. Since the story was focused entirely on the couple as an effect of reducing minor characters, there were a lot of detailed touches on the expressions and the acting of the characters. The fine touches on the characters' eyes, the wavering of their eyes, and the fluttering eyelashes…. All of these were added indiscreetly so it felt very natural even during long close ups on the characters. And the backgrounds which would normally be paused were all animated. Even though they were small movements, it gave off the feeling that everything was alive. It felt like he could even feel the characters breathing. Those animated fine details were something that Sorata had never seen before. It gave him goosebumps while watching it.

"I'm already looking forward to the finished product."

"Me too… I think it's your best work yet."

"You're going to upload it to the video site when it's complete, right?"

"Yeah."

Misaki answered with a big smile on her face.

"I probably have to scale it down though. I'm going to make it so that it's usable for a theatrical movie."

Misaki wasn't hesitating. She was properly doing what she believed in. She made what she wanted to make and when she finished, she would upload it to a video sharing site for others to see. It was Misaki's pure mind that was supporting her.

"You know, Kouhai-kun, Nanamin."

“What is it?”

“Yes?”

“…I want to use my last resort, and I need your help.”

Misaki was making a serious expression like never before.

“Last resort?”

“…That’s a secret, Kouhai-kun.”

“What? …Then what should we do?”

“I want you to leave Jin and I together by ourselves on Christmas Eve.”

“What? T-That’s?! Senpai, don’t tell me, you plan to...?!”

“Wait Kanda!”

“Ah, my bad. No, I’m sorry. I won’t dig into it too much.”

But on Christmas Eve by themselves. It was too suspicious.

“That day Aoyama and I won’t be here because we’re going to see a play and Shiina will be at the End-of-Year party with her publisher. Then the only ones left will be Akasaka and… Chihiro-sensei.”

The problem wasn’t going to solve itself, so he sent a message to Ryuunosuke’s phone. Since the 24th was the last day of the semester, those who stayed in dorms went back home straight away.

—Do you have some time?

A reply came back quickly. That probably meant that it was Maid-chan.

—Please make it short. I am very busy these days exterminating a foreign pest which is going on Ryuunosuke-sama's nerves, so I don’t have the time to foolishly play along with Sorata-sama. How are you these days? From Maid-chan who is having a cat fight.

It was one hell of a reply.

—Will Akasaka be in Sakurasou this Christmas Eve?

This time, a reply came slightly later. But by later I mean only 10 seconds.

—What will I be doing on the day when it is legal for an old man dressed in red and white clothes to trespass other people's houses via their chimney?

Maid-chan's master was here as expected.

—Your view of Christmas is weird! And that aside, won't you go back home?

—Obviously not.

—Could you tell me what's so obvious about it?

—Why would I go back if I purposely chose a school with dorms so that I can escape from that house?

—You don't want to go back? Why?

Now that he thought about it, he never heard about the reason why Ryuunosuke went to Suimei High.

—I won't go back home. Aren't you satisfied with that answer, Sorata?

—Well, yeah… But anyways, I want to ask of you to leave the dorm on Christmas Eve. For Misaki-senpai.

—Understood. I'll deal with it.

He folded his phone and put it back into his pocket.

"What did Akasaka say?"

"He said that he'll deal with it. All that's left now is Chihiro-sensei, huh? Well, she'll grumble, but I guess it'll work out."

Thinking that he should deal with the bothersome work and get it over and done with, Sorata stood up.

"Then I'll leave it to you."

Nanami said while still seated.

"…Aren't you coming with me?"

"I've got a favour to ask of Kamiigusa-senpai."

"What is it, what is it, Nanamin?! It's your first request! Great, I'll grant you anything that you want!"

When Misaki jumped out to Nanami, she fell backwards.

"Ah, hold on, senpai… W-Where do you think you're touching?"

"Breasts."

"I'm not telling you to answer m- Garh! Get off me!"

Misaki wasn't the type who would let go just like that. Seeing girls wrestling and twisting together was a physically tiring sight to see, so after enjoying the view just enough, Sorata said,

"Well then, enjoy your time."

And left the room.

As he was returning to his room for now, he stopped in front of Room 101's door. There was something on the floor. It was an unopened package of baumkuchen.

He picked it up. The expiry date hadn't passed, and on the wrapping, it had「For Sorata」written on it with a marker.

Sensing someone, Sorata looked around to find Mashiro hiding near the stairs, looking towards his direction.

When their eyes met, she hid herself like a wild animal. And when she carefully poked her head out again, she realised that Sorata was looking at her and fled upstairs this time. There was a sound of a door closing upstairs. It seemed like she ran away to her room.

“What’s up with her…”

“Isn’t she trying to reconcile with you?”

The one who said that was Chihiro, who came out from the caretaker’s room with a beer in hand.

“Do you even realise that Mashiro thinks to herself, that maybe you might be happy if she gave you something that she likes or something along those lines.”

“Baumkuchen isn’t a cure-all item.”

Ignoring Sorata, Chihiro entered the kitchen. She was most likely going for another beer inside the fridge. It was scary that she was drinking as much as ever, even during the winter. For now, Sorata followed Chihiro to talk about Christmas Eve.

As expected, Chihiro sat on a chair and was drinking a cold can of beer savouring. Sorata sat on the round table, opposite to her, and bit on the baumkuchen that Mashiro gave him.

“It’s not like I don’t understand how you feel.”

Chihiro looked at him with out-of-focus eyes.

“It’s obvious that someone would be annoyed if they see someone slacking off, when they’re being so serious. Even more so if it was someone close to them.”

“You’re a teacher, so please don’t butt into things that your student doesn’t want you to be involved in.”

Without batting an eyelid to Sorata’s complaint, Chihiro continued to talk.

“But you already know it, right? Mashiro’s attitude towards manga isn’t slacking. She didn’t lose her passion nor her goal.”

“…”

“You just don’t know how to accept the feelings that you haven’t understood. Do something about it yourself.”

“If you know the answer, then try to do something about it as well.”

“Don’t wanna~. Half of my life is made of beer and the other half is made of match-up meetings.”

She was still holding a grudge about what Sorata told her before.

“Plus, it’s your job to take care of Mashiro.”

“Because I’m on「Mashiro Duty」?”

He offered a flimsy excuse without much thought.

“No, you idiot. Because you’re a man.”

“…”

At Chihiro’s surprising reply, Sorata wasn’t able to say a thing and closed his mouth.

“She’s not good at fighting, so she doesn’t know how to reconcile. What are you trying to do going at her pace while not even understanding your own feelings? If things are starting to build up in you, then let it all out. Isn’t it your strong point, to get all sentimental immaturely?”

“What a cruel evaluation of me… I do have a lot of other good points you know?”

But he could accept what Chihiro was saying. Mashiro wasn’t good at fighting. Mashiro wouldn’t know what Sorata is saying and Sorata didn’t explain why he was feeling angry properly either.

“Show Shiina, Kanda. You’ve got it hanging on you, don’t you?”

“That last part was unnecessary! Just when I was starting to respect you. I’m disappointed! Wow! I guess humans become asexual as they grow older!”

“You just don’t know women.”

“Don’t say it in a weird way! Even if it’s true in one sense!”

“You’re so picky about every single thing. Ah~ you’re so rude.”

The 29 years and 23 months old arts teacher sulked. With Christmas approaching and her 30th birthday next month, she must be quite sensitive right now.

Chihiro chugged down the beer in desperation.

“Sensei, does beer taste good?”

“No~, this is mine, so I’m not giving you any.”

“Why are you so damn greedy! And I can’t drink anyway because I’m a minor! If you’re an educator, pay attention to that point!”

“I don’t plan on becoming your sibling by sharing a drink with you.”

“I don’t remember being part of the underground!”

“Who cares?”

“You’re the one who suggested it!”

Just when he thought Chihiro was actually acting like a teacher for once, waa Chihiro Chihiro. Was it really OK for someone like her to be a teacher…

“…Why did you become a teacher, Chihiro-sensei?”

“Because I thought it would be fun.”

“I’m asking seriously.”

He heard about it from Koharu during the culture festival that Chihiro was originally aiming to become a painter. And also that she was encouraging and being encouraged by her classmate Kazuki Fujisawa towards their goals…

“I don’t know what you’ve heard from someone, but I can’t remember that far back ago. I don’t think there was a great reason for it. I graduated from university and needed a job, so I thought I should get a teaching license and ended up becoming a teacher.”

“But you didn’t study painting to become a teacher, though.”

“…Well, that’s true. At the start, I did hope that I’ll be able to have my big break-through while being a teacher and painting different pieces.”

But now she was still an arts teacher, but she wasn’t drawing anything.

“Why don’t you draw any more?”

“Well, who knows?”

“Don’t try to avoid my question.”

“Maybe the world was too hard for me to do something after graduating from school?”

It was almost as if she wasn’t talking about herself.

“When you enter society… your free time is very limited unlike the days when you’re a student… And you start to give excuses like these. So if you want to achieve something in the future, you need to hurry up and do it.”

“I’m not talking about that, but your thoughts about it.”

When he asked straightforwardly, Chihiro sighed loudly.

“Haa. You’re still so young.”

“I’m sorry… But I would be grateful if you told me what part of me is young.”

“You thinking that the world has to be separated in black and white and also thinking that adults are those who are able to split things into black and white.”

“…Then am I wrong?”

“I think Mitaka already knows about these things… but I guess a one-year difference in high school is a big gap. Well, in his case, it might be because he’s always around older women.”

“…”

“I don’t think you’ll understand even if I tell you, but do you still want to hear it?”

“I want to hear it.”

“In reality, there aren’t many things that can be divided into black and white. Some obscure things make up society and it overflows from society. If you think about it, isn’t that true? The world is full of people who’re in the middle of doing something. Think about it, if you end up becoming a game creator, will your ending credits play

even though it's not a game?"

That obviously won't happen.

"It won't right? It's not the end. It'll continue on for another 60 years."

"…"

60 years. It was hard to imagine a situation after that time. He didn't even know what lay before him in ten years time.

"Do you sort of get what I'm saying?"

"Are you telling me not to be so focused on what's right in front of me?"

"Not at all. Well, that's somewhat commendable, seeing that it's coming from you."

"… Then…."

"If you become someone who can only accept what seems to be the best for you, then the people around you will become unhappy."

What she said sounded very convincing, because it felt like Chihiro was talking from her own experience.

"I'm not telling you to not expect the best, so don't misunderstand that."

"I don't know about that, but I think I sort of get it."

"I'm just saying not to get so frustrated if something doesn't go the way that you want it to. Because in your case, if you can't manage that, then you won't be able to be with Mashiro."

"Why are we talking about Shiina and I?"

"Because people change… You won't be a high school student forever. If you stay in Sakurasou playing and laughing all day, you wouldn't be able to become the person that you want to be, right? The same goes for Kamiigusa, Mitaka, Aoyama and Akasaka as well as Mashiro. If you want something that you don't have right now, then there are times where you have to break out of your comfortable relationships. You have to come out of your comfort zone."

What Chihiro was saying was slightly irrelevant, but all of her points hit Sorata deeply.

“The only ones who doesn’t change in school are the teachers. During this time of the year, with graduation approaching… It’s really frustrating. But that transition isn’t farewell.”

“…A journey…”

“You seem to be good at coming up with those words when you’re not drunk.”

Chihiro looked no different than any other day, but Sorata thought that she was more drunk than usual, because otherwise, she wouldn’t have talked like this.

“There, my lesson ends there. Go and sleep.”

At this sentence, Sorata obediently stood up.

He should talk about Christmas Eve sometime else. There was no point talking to a drunk person only for them to forget it.

As Sorata was about to leave the kitchen, he looked back at Chihiro.

“Sensei.”

“What? Want me to make you feel more depressed?”

“I don’t think it’s too late for you.”

Things wouldn’t return back to as they were in the past, but it’s not too late. Sorata felt like that was the moral of Chihiro’s story.

“I don’t need to hear that from you. I already know.”

“Good night.”

As he was really about to leave, Chihiro stopped him.

“Ah, Kanda, I forgot to tell you.”

“What now? Just when I was about to leave at a good timing! Wait, why am I sounding cool when I was so gloomy!”

“Go home for the end of the year.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Because I’m going on a trip to Australia. So, without a supervisor, Sakurasou will be closed.”

“Why are you doing whatever you want!”

“I am the lawmaker.”

“I request a Sakurasou meeting!”

“Denied. Since none of you, yourself included, went back home during the summer, your parents must be worried. Think of it as a Christmas present and the New Year blessing and receive it gratefully.”

“What are you so proud of when you’ve done nothing good! That’s completely wrong! And what about Shiina? Is she going back to England?”

“Why don’t you just take her back to, Fukushima, was it? Along with your cats.”

“It’s Fukuoka!”

“Ah~ got it, got it. Tokushima, right?”

“Why did you keep the「shima」in there?!”

There was no point talking to a drunk, but he couldn’t just take it in.

“Anyway, I said it. Make sure you tell the others.”

“…”

Having received the colossal assignment, Sorata sighed and returned to his room.

Part 2

Everything was a blur as soon as exams finished.

Not only was he worried about his results, he was also still shocked at Mashiro's fat zeros for all of her 9 subjects, just like last semester; guaranteeing her to take the make-up exams again.

At Sakurasou, Misaki held their traditional sweet potato roasting competition, and as if that wasn't enough, she decorated the maple tree in their garden with Christmas ornaments and they were spending rowdy daily lives.

If there had been a day in particular that was different from others, it would have to be yesterday, the 23rd. Sorata went to the neighbouring shopping centre by himself and sent some Christmas presents he bought for his sister Yuuko.

But in the end, he wasn't able to reconcile with Mashiro. Things were still very awkward between them.

The only thing that had changed was that Mashiro started to leave a packet of baumkuchen in front of his door every day.

He was eating them every day because she was leaving it out there for him, even though they were originally bought by Sorata *for* Mashiro. Since they were things that Sorata bought for Mashiro, it didn't sit right with him whenever he ate them.

Even today, the 24th, the last day of the semester, there was a baumkuchen in front of his door when Sorata stepped out of his room. He had been playing around with programming until it was time to go to the play with Nanami.

And Mashiro must've finally reached her limits because the packet was already opened and there was a bite worth missing.

Eating it, he checked the time to find that it was past 4:00 p.m.

The sun was setting and the western sky was dyed red, but the day wasn't over just yet. He first had to fulfill his promise to Ayano, Mashiro's editor, to take Mashiro to the rendezvous point so that she could attend the End-of-Year Party which was being

held by her publishing company.

After that, Sorata had to meet up with Nanami, who was going to leave early from work, and go see the play. Luckily, the event hall for the party and the play were in the vicinity of the same station, so he didn't need to travel too far.

When the play was finished, Sorata would go have some dinner with Nanami and would spend some time together with her until the party ended. After that, they would go and pick up Mashiro, walk around visiting some shops, then finally return to Sakurasou a little after midnight.

Chihiro was going to match-up meetings. Ryuunosuke said that he'd book a business hotel and lock himself away. He already left, so his room should be empty now.

He lied to Jin beforehand that he, Nanami, and Mashiro would come back to Sakurasou for a Christmas party after the play, so Jin went out to buy cake. When he came back, the three of them would already be gone, so Jin and Misaki could be together by themselves.

"…I'm getting nervous for some reason."

Sorata wasn't really doing anything, but his heart beat faster when he thought about his two third year seniors.

He checked the time again.

He should start getting prepared to go out with Mashiro.

When he went upstairs, Sorata shouted at the door to Room 202.

"Shiina, start getting ready. I gave you what to wear, right?"

Then the door opened.

"Ah…"

Sorata froze on the spot with his mouth agape when he saw Mashiro.

Mashiro was wearing her party dress. It was a simple knee-length one-piece that wasn't extravagant, but it suited Mashiro. A shawl that was worn like a ribbon around her rather cold looking neck was the highlight.

“How does she look, Kouhai-kun?”

Misaki popped out from behind Mashiro.

“Ah, um… ah...”

“Looks like you’re lost for words because she’s so pretty!”

Misaki must’ve helped Mashiro to get changed.

“Sorata?”

“…It seems somewhat familiar.”

Sorata said that because he was too shy to compliment her honestly.

“I wore it when I won an award.”

Now that he thought about it, Mashiro was wearing the same outfit in that photograph with someone famous at the art gallery when he was dragged along by Rita before.

“Now, Mashiron, wear your coat!”

Misaki dressed Mashiro from behind. The coat wasn’t very long and the edges of the dress underneath it attracted Sorata’s eyes.

“Then shall we get going?”

“Yeah…”

So Sorata quickly got ready as well.

Misaki saw them off as Sorata and Mashiro wordlessly stepped out.

On his way out, Sorata noticed the familiar envelope inside the letterbox. It was the result of the「Let’s Make a Game」competition. Without opening it, Sorata wordlessly put it in his pocket with his slightly nervous hand.

“…”

It seemed like Mashiro did notice it, but he ignored her and started to walk.

On their way to the station, Sorata was teased by people that he knew as he walked with Mashiro down the red-tiled shopping district. He gave excuses in cold sweat and Sorata was finally able to lead Mashiro at a slow pace, holding off his desire to run.

After all that trouble, they got on the train at the station. From there, they quietly rode it for an hour without much of a conversation between them —just swaying with the train as they traveled.

While they were on the train,

"Sorata…"

Mashiro said his name, but,

"What?"

"…Nothing."

That was basically their conversation during the ride, so it was painfully awkward.

Their longest conversation on the ride was:

"Sorata, that envelope…"

"…It's the result for the proposal."

"Yeah… you're not going to have a look?"

"…Later."

"I see…"

And that was it.

When they arrived after switching trains and got out of the station, Sorata sighed unintentionally at the suffocating situation.

Sorata was told by Ayano that the rendezvous point was just up the stairs from the subway station and that he'll "know it" when he gets there. And when he did as he was told, Sorata knew that he came to the right place.

There was an empty park-like square in front of hotels and studio apartment buildings

that gave off a western feel, and the air was chilly due to a fountain pumping out water. The surrounding was decorated in flashy lights which matched the Christmas season and the whole place was basically set up for dates.

Ayano was already there, and when she spotted Sorata and Mashiro, she waved her hand and sent them the signal to come over.

“Thank you, Sorata.”

Ayano had a coat resting on top of her formal clothes.

“No problem, I had some business here anyways.”

“Really? Then I’ll be borrowing the princess now.”

“What time should I come back?”

“I can’t let high school students stay out for too long, so maybe meet me back here at half past 9?”

“I understand.”

While he was talking to Ayano, Mashiro kept staring at Sorata’s face. That look was bothering him, but Sorata chose not to say anything about it, because she was going to say “Nothing” without a doubt.

“Then, see you later.”

Ayano waved her hand as she took Mashiro. Their figures quickly disappeared out of sight, blending into the crowds of people out on the night of Christmas Eve.

Being left alone, Sorata waited for Nanami to arrive and decided to watch the lights under the cold sky. Red and green, white and blue. The flickering lights harmoniously created a wonderful atmosphere.

Still watching the lights, but closing his eyes slightly, Sorata leaned against a street lamp and stooped because of the cold.

His breath was white. On the weather forecast, it was reported that tonight would be coldest night this winter.

When he looked up at the sky, there were no stars in sight and dark clouds loomed over Sorata's head.

One by one, people spotted their sweetheart and they left together with smiles on their faces. Looking at those people in a daze, Sorata finally realised something. Wasn't a date something where you meet a girl outside and go to the movies or have dinner together?

—Huh? Then… does that mean that I'm waiting for a date?

When he thought about it that way, he started to become nervous.

He looked around to distract himself and as he was following a university couple with his eyes, someone tapped him on the shoulders behind his back and he looked around in surprise. The person's long gloved finger poked him on his cheek.

"Hey…"

He was going to say that it wasn't like her to do such a thing, but Sorata's words didn't continue on. Instead, he only blinked his eyes.

A girl dressed in a red coat with her hair straightened was looking at Sorata with her eyes shaking with both excitement and nervousness.

"May I ask who you are?"

"It's me! It's Nanami Aoyama!"

"S-Sorry… it was just unexpected."

She wore a 3-layer frilly miniskirt and a pair of boots, but her thighs were bare. Nanami's attire was completely different from her usual casual outfits.

"…Is it weird?"

As if feeling strange not having her hair up in her usual ponytail, Nanami fidgeted the back of her neck.

"I was just surprised at how different you look."

"…How is it different?"

“Well…”

Nanami’s face showed signs of nervousness. That nervousness had also infected Sorata.

“I think this look looks great.”

“Really?”

“But it reminds me of Misaki-senpai for some reason.”

“I borrowed all of these from Kamiigusa-senpai.”

As if being relieved thanks to a magic spell, Nanami’s usual natural smile returned, so Sorata’s nervousness eased.

“To surprise you.”

“…I was really surprised.”

“Then it’s a great success… I’m glad I put effort into it…”

“Hmm?”

“It’s nearly time for the play to start.”

“Right, let’s hurry.”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

Nanami tugged at Sorata’s elbows and started to walk. He was about to lose his balance, but he recovered and quickly stood by Nanami’s side.

And so, they headed to the theatre while talking about trivial things such as their school results and cats.

Part 3

The play started at 7 o'clock and lasted for about an hour and a half.

Their seats were the centre seats in the front row on the second floor, so they had a nice view of the multi-purpose theatre.

The passion and the energy of the actors could be felt, different from just watching them on TV or in a film.

Sorata also liked that it was a comedy, so he could watch it without any suspense.

The story was about three people who had a debt and had to come up with the money, and their way of doing so was to trick the person who lent the money to them and repay him with the money they take. But in the way, they spent more money while they were trying to fool the lender and their debt grew even more.

The number of characters was quite small, with only four actors, but their charisma attracted the viewer's attention through their detailed acting in each scene.

Sorata felt that the play company proved that large props, teams and budgets weren't needed to produce a great show, so he had learned a lot from them.

When he looked at Nanami's expression during the play he saw that she was deeply engrossed in the play with a serious expression. But she still laughed with Sorata at funny scenes.

Deeply absorbed in the play, one and a half hours flew by quickly for them.

The expressions of the four actors who bowed to the crowd's applause appeared to be worn out, but full of achievement. It was touching because their expressions were not fake but real.

The applause died out 10 minutes after the curtains fell. Still enjoying the aftertaste of the play, Sorata and Nanami joined the flow of the people leaving the hall while talking about the play.

As they were nearly at the door, the flow of people slowed down. Nevertheless,

Sorata and Nanami squeezed through the crowd and exited the theatre.

At that moment, it started to snow from the sky.

“I guess it was cold enough…”

“It’s snowing… a lot.”

Nanami took out an umbrella from her bag and opened it up. And she held it out for Sorata to take.

“Should I hold it?”

“We’re using my umbrella, so it’s the least you can do.”

“You’re good at convincing people.”

“I know, right?”

Taking the umbrella, he walked side by side with Nanami. They were planning to have some dinner now that the play was over.

“…Kanda, thanks for coming with me today.”

“No problem, it was fun anyway.”

“Yeah…”

Afterwards, Sorata and Nanami avoided the crowds of people and walked towards the shop they wanted to go while chatting about the play and being hit with snow.

“This year is coming to an end…”

“I know, right?”

“…Just two more months, huh?”

Nanami quietly spoke.

“Two months? Until what?”

There was only a week until the year was over and another three months until the end

of school year.

“There will be an audition to become a member of the agency in February.”

“Ahh, the academy.”

“Yeah.”

Two months. It sounded like a long time, but it was short. The graduation ceremony was going to be held in early March, so in just two months time, the third years were going to leave Sakurasou.

“Do your best… But I guess that’s not saying much for a student who is already trying hard.”

“Am I doing my best? I’m not too sure.”

“You are; I can guarantee it.”

“Yeah… but, you’re right. I can only do my best…”

Nanami looked up at the distant sky.

Her expression seemed somewhat lonely.

“Are you nervous?”

“I know I can only do my best for the auditions, so I’m not that nervous. But I am worried.”

“Worried?”

“If I can’t be accepted, then I’ll have return to Osaka.”

“Huh? You mean accepted as a voice actress?”

“Of course.”

“So it’s true… that your dad is against it.”

“Yeah. So I have to be accepted.”

"…And what about school next year?"

"Even if I'm accepted, I'll still attend school. Unless I become someone popular very quickly and get very busy as a voice actress that way."

"Hey, hey, aren't you aiming for being a popular voice actress?"

"I will graduate from high school. So I don't want to think about, but if I don't make it into the agency… then I'll have to transfer to a school in Osaka."

"Transfer… so you want to graduate."

"Kanda, do you think I won't be able to make it?"

"No, that's not it, but…"

"But?"

"It's… difficult, isn't it?"

"...Yeah. Originally, we started with 60 people. But over the last 2 years, six people dropped out due to various reasons, and out of the 54 remaining people, only three or four people make it on an average."

"That's a lot lower than I thought…"

The chances of being accepted were less than 1 in 10.

"Sometimes, they pick out more than that since the number isn't fixed, but that can also mean that they will pick out less people."

"…So it really depends on your skills?"

"Yeah."

He had to accept that fact. The world was not kind enough for people to succeed through effort alone… and Nanami should know that better than him. It wouldn't end even if she succeeds in getting accepted. After she joins the agency, she would have to compete with her seniors for jobs and try even harder. Trials after trials awaited her.

"You know, Kanda."

“Hmm?”

“Will you be upset if I was to leave?”

“Don’t say something like that. You can do it.”

“And where’s the proof to that?”

“There is none.”

Sorata said it bluntly.

“You don’t have to be all manly right now.”

“Whatever, but I understand. So you will be a voice actress if you pass.”

“I’ll just be a newbie or a hatchling when I do though. There are levels in the agency.”

“Levels?”

“In my academy’s case, I’ll be entering as sort of like an intern if I pass the audition in February.”

“I see.”

“And when I get acknowledged there, I’ll become a junior member.”

“Junior?”

“I’ll be a rookie. And during the junior years, I would have to work and produce some good results to become an average, then a senior.”

“So that’s the system. Seems like you have a long way to go.”

“But I think it won’t matter as long as I get some acting jobs. It’s not like I’ll know a lot of people who will be watching. So I think I’ll be able to work harder when I’m able to work.”

“I see.”

Their conversation ended there for now.

Sorata leaned the umbrella to his right so that Nanami wouldn't be hit with snow.

As they were waiting for the crossing lights to change, Nanami talked to him again.

"Hey, Kanda."

"Yeah?"

"If I pass the audition… when I join the agency, can ya hear me out then, Kanda?"

Looking at Nanami's serious expression, Sorata couldn't point out her dialect.

"If you want to talk, then I can hear you out now."

"Now is no good."

"Why?"

"I can't say it now, ya hear?"

"…I see."

Not quite understanding Nanami, Sorata agreed with her awkwardly.

"Because I want to fully concentrate on this... I don't want to have any regrets."

"OK. I promise."

"Yeah. Thank you."

"By the way, where's the shop that we're going to?"

"Ah, that's…"

Switching back to the standard dialect, Nanami took out a map from her coat pocket. They looked at the map and checked their surroundings. And as they were looking for the shop sign, Sorata's phone rang.

It was from Mashiro. She should still be at the party. Thinking that it was slightly strange, Sorata answered his phone.

"What's wrong, Shiina?"

「Sorata? It's Ayano Iida.」

At the unexpected voice, Sorata ended up answering with a "What?!".

"Why are you calling, Iida?"

「Sorry. Shiina disappeared.」

"What?!"

「She disappeared from the hall when I went to the toilet… When I asked the hotel employees, it seemed like she went outside.」

"Why?!"

「That, I'm not too sure about. Do you have any ideas where she might be?」

Places that Mashiro might go… He wouldn't know any even if he thought about it.

"I'm near the hotel anyway, so I'll try to look for her as well!"

「Thanks. I'll look around as well, so give me a call when you find anything.」

"Yes."

Sorata shut his phone with an angry expression.

"What the hell is she thinking? There's a limit to how far you can push a person."

"Did something happen to Mashiro?"

"She disappeared from the party hall at the hotel. And it seems like she went outside."

If she wandered around a place she wasn't familiar with, she would get lost for sure. It was already hard enough for Mashiro not to get lost at a place she knew.

"Aoyama, I'm sorry, but…"

"We can eat later. What are you doing, we need to find Mashiro."

Nanami started to run towards the hotel first.

Sorata quickly followed her and ran side by side. The umbrella was in the way while running, so he folded it up straight away. Sorata thought that he wouldn't get too wet since it was just snow, and that Mashiro wouldn't have an umbrella anyway.

Even after running around the hotel surroundings once, Mashiro was nowhere in sight. It started to snow heavily for the last 30 minutes and snow started to pile up on the road.

The air he deeply breathed into his lungs was cold. When he inhaled deeply with his nose, the inside of his nose stung.

"Mashiro's not here..."

Nanami's exposed face was red and her shoulders heaved up and down as she breathed deeply.

Seeing her like that, Sorata stopped for now. He looked around him. If Mashiro was around, he would be able to spot her straight away. Sorata had that confidence.

"You've got snow on your head."

Dusting off the snow piled on Nanami's head, Sorata started to run again.

Bowing her head slightly, Nanami quickly followed.

He had no idea as to where Mashiro was going to go. This was an unfamiliar place to him.

"Kanda, where are you going?"

"I'm going to look around the places I've went to before. The place where her editor picked her up first."

Being cautious so that he won't fall over, he crossed the crossing when he suddenly heard wailing sounds of an ambulance. The ambulance sped past a corner and past the halted Sorata while spinning its red sirens. And it stopped at a crowd of people around 20 meters ahead of Sorata.

An ill feeling invaded Sorata's body. The inside of his mouth dried up for some reason. The left side of his chest started to ache.

"Don't tell me…"

Led by his ill feelings, Sorata started to run.

"Ah, Kanda!"

Gasping for air and his feet sliding under the slippery path, Sorata was able to get to the crowd of people, where the ambulance was parked, safely.

His head cried out 「*No, no*」 over and over again. He pushed himself towards the front of the crowd.

When he was finally able to get a glimpse of the sight, he saw a black car that drove itself onto the path after smashing into the guardrails and slammed into a corner of a building. The car must've slipped because of the snow, there were brilliant skid marks on the road.

Luckily, the man who was driving the car was uninjured and answered a policeman's questions rather apologetically. There were no injured people.

"What… That gave me a fright…"

"Kanda?!"

Arriving slightly late, Nanami asked Sorata with a nervous voice.

"It's all right. Shiina's not involved. Let's go."

"I'll go to the hotel area one more time."

"OK. Give me a call when you find her."

Sorata and Nanami returned to the crossings and parted their ways left and right.

Being left alone, Sorata ran towards the water fountain near the business area.

The shining Christmas lights were turned off. Was it for energy saving reasons? Due to that reason, the place was quiet, dark and there were no people around.

Sighing, Sorata walked through that area while seeing his own breaths.

Mashiro wasn't near the now-stopped water fountain. More than that, there wasn't a

single animal in sight. He dusted off the snow on his head. He bit down on his lips and thought about where he should go next when he noticed someone's movements behind the fountain.

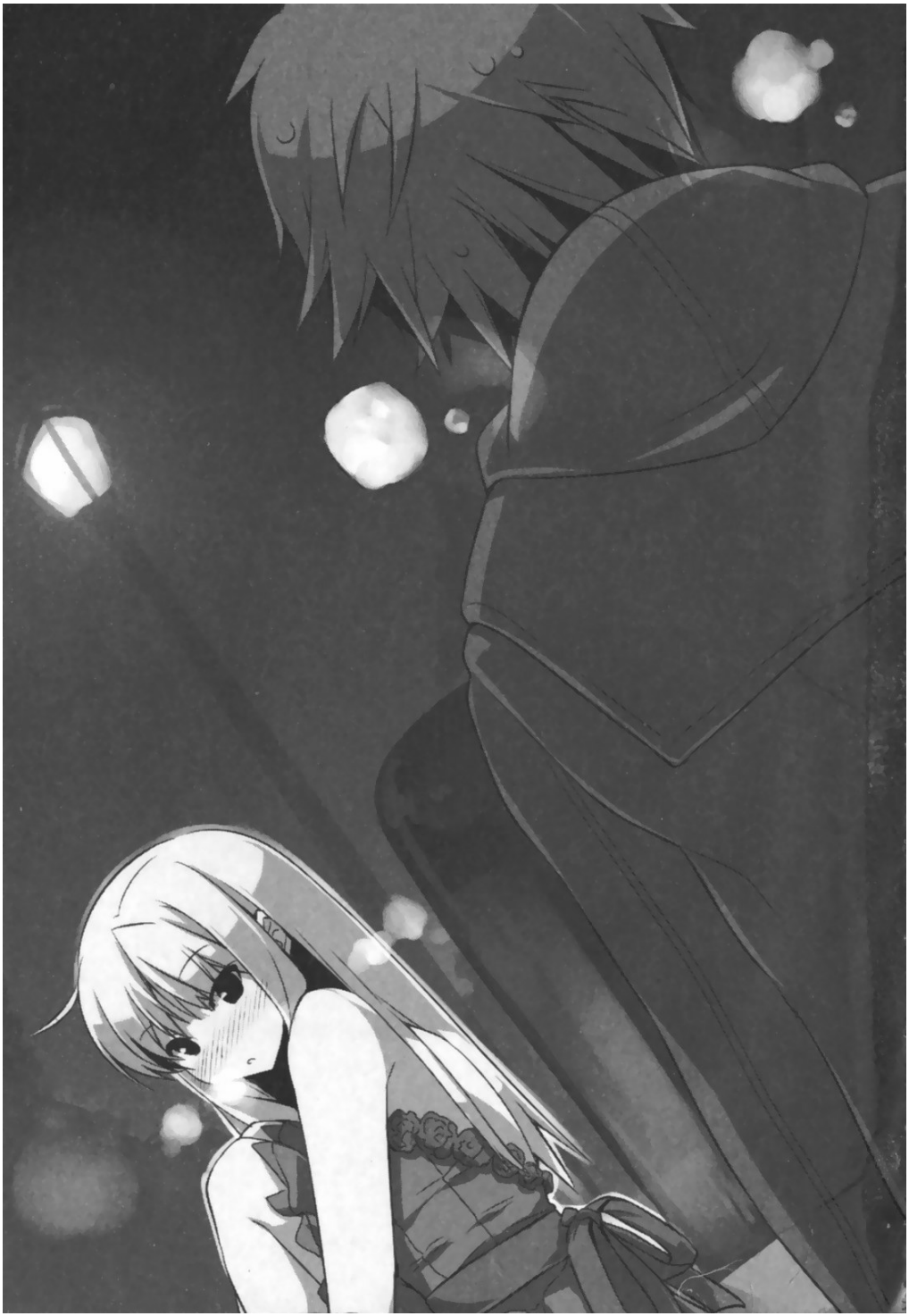
"Shiina?!"

When he yelled, a shadow moved vaguely. Sorata sprinted around the fountain at full speed.

Mashiro sat hugging her knees on the steps of the water fountain. She looked cold, wearing only her warm coloured party dress….

"You idiot! What do you think you're doing?!"

Mashiro slowly raised her head.



"Ah… Sorata."

Mashiro's voice shook from the cold.

"Here, I'll give you this."

Then Mashiro extended a small plate to him with her two hands as if it was something precious. On the snow covered dish, there was a thick slice of baumkuchen. She must've taken it from the party.

"What the hell are you saying?!"

Sorata quickly took off his duffel coat and covered Mashiro's shoulders with it. And to make her feel even a little bit warmer, he rubbed his hands over the coat.

"It's delicious… so I wanted Sorata to taste it."

Mashiro looked at Sorata as her pale lips shook.

"So you left the hotel?!"

"Yeah."

"…"

Sorata wasn't able to hide his bafflement and closed his mouth with a stern expression.

"Are you angry?"

"…What the hell were you thinking?"

He really couldn't understand her.

"Well that's because Sorata was…"

"I was what?"

"Sorata was… angry these days. I've got lots of things that I want to say… but Sorata always looks angry…. I didn't like it, so I thought about what I should do to make Sorata happy. I didn't know what I should do. It was like this with Rita as well… I… don't know. I don't know what I should do to make Sorata happy or to make everyone

happy."

Mashiro's face didn't contain any expressions even as she spoke like a dam being burst open. Just like how she said she didn't know what to do, she didn't know what kind of an expression to put on as well.

"So this…"

Mashiro held out the baumkuchen dish again. "Sorata… this…"

She held out both of her hands.

"This… is all I can do."

"…"

Sorata wordlessly extended his hand. He felt like his chest was on fire. How much did he hurt this girl?

Sorata dusted the snow piled on Mashiro's head and then reached out for the baumkuchen. The baumkuchen that he put in his mouth was slightly sweet, but he couldn't tell how it tasted too well because it was cold.

"Is it delicious?"

"It's delicious."

"I'm glad."

Mashiro made a relieved expression. But seeing Sorata's stern expression, she returned to her stone face.

"Sorata, are you angry?"

"I'm not angry."

That was a lie. He had been angry ever since that day. Because he was ticked off at Mashiro's slacking off attitude towards manga. He was angry at Mashiro's attitude as she observed Sorata to reconcile with him. And today…

"Let's… go back to the party at the hotel."

When he grabbed Mashiro's hand to help her stand up, he looked at her feet. Mashiro wasn't wearing any shoes. Where did she lose them?

"Your shoes! Aren't your feet cold?!"

"Sorata… really is angry."

Ignoring to answer that remark, Sorata lifted Mashiro up on her feet and forced her on to his back. He put strength in his legs and stood up on the spot. Mashiro definitely had a weight and that confirmed to Sorata that she was actually there. But her body was so cold, that that moment of relief was instantly gone.

"Sorata."

Mashiro whispered into his ears.

"What?"

That short reply was full of Sorata's annoyance.

"…Are you angry, Sorata?"

"I'm not."

"You sound angry."

When she pointed that out, Sorata closed his eyes and deeply breathed in.

"Yes, I'm angry."

He answered truthfully as he breathed out slowly.

He could feel Mashiro's body stiffening from the nervousness from his back. And she wasn't only shaking because of the cold. But Sorata felt that he had to say it.

Because there was a definite difference between being nice and being indifferent…

He was this angry because Mashiro was always on his mind. He was angry because he actually cared. He felt that Mashiro needed to know that.

Even if that was going to make her hate him.

“Didn’t you think that people would get worried if you leave without telling anyone!”

“…I wanted to see Sorata.”

“When there was an accident over there, I thought you were caught up in it… I thought I was going to have a heart attack!”

“…”

“Do you even understand me?”

Mashiro clung even more tightly onto his back. He understood that Mashiro was feeling hurt. Sorata had hurt her. But there was no point stopping now.

He had to say it till the end. Sorata was hurting the same way as Mashiro was.

“I admit it, Shiina.”

“…”

“I… do think that I was also in the wrong this time, but…”

“Sorata was? Why?”

He realised why he was feeling so irritated recently. It was because he was actually angry at himself.

“I should’ve said it earlier.”

Things were not resolved because he was bottling up his feelings and didn’t try to resolve them with Mashiro. Because Mashiro wouldn’t know anyway… He had tacitly asked Mashiro to understand him.

But it was obvious that she wouldn’t understand if he didn’t say it to her. And Mashiro in particular, needed him to spell it out for her. He already knew that; he already knew that he wouldn’t be able to express his feelings to her in a natural way...

If he was going to have a fight, he was going to fight seriously.

“You need to admit it as well.”

“…”

“You won’t be able to draw if you hurt your finger. Now that you’re serialised to a magazine it’s obvious that you should look after your fingers. What were you thinking going outside without a coat in the cold? What are you going to do if you harm your body?!”

“…I…”

“You’re now a professional mangaka, so you need to think about those things!”

“…”

“This is exactly why I stopped you from cooking.”

He wanted to know if there was a wiser or gentler way of expressing himself. He wanted to. But he didn’t know a the way to… He expressed himself idiotically, talking in a crude and tacky way.

Even if they were to be hurt by each other's words, they would be able to reconcile afterwards.

They can slowly learn about each other, even if they are doing it roughly. It was impossible to become an adult without being hurt at all… That’s how one becomes an adult.

“…”

“Shiina, if you have something you want to say, then say it.”

He urged Mashiro who had been quiet for a while to talk. He could only feel her breaths on his ear.

“It’s all Sorata’s fault.”

“…You’ve already said that before.”

“I thought about Sorata… carefully.”

“….”

“And after that, I wanted to try.”

“Try what?”

“I want to pack a lunch for Sorata just like how Misaki does for Jin.”

“…”

“I never thought like this before.”

Mashiro hung on to Sorata harder than before.

“Even I don’t know myself.”

“…”

“Why did I become like this?”

“…”

“I’ve... never been this way.”

Sorata could understand how Mashiro felt.

But he didn’t know what else to say from here. He already realised that he held some feelings for Mashiro since long ago. When he heard that Mashiro would return to England, that feeling was reaffirmed much more strongly. He decided that he should tell her someday. No matter what consequences it caused…

Can that time be now?

Mashiro had the talents as a painter and she was continuously developing that skill as a mangaka. But he hadn’t made any progress ever since he started.

He thought that he wasn’t worthy enough for Mashiro. There was a difference between them that was invisible to the eyes. A huge one at that…

He couldn’t say it out loud until he had done something noteworthy. Even a small success would do. Even a small one would become his confidence.

“…”

As he was trying to think of something to say while he bit down on his lips, Sorata suddenly thought of something.

—If I pass the audition this time, I'll talk about the airport incident with Mashiro.

That's what he decided on the last day of the culture festival.

He adjusted Mashiro's position on his back and took out the envelope from his pants pocket.

"Sorata?"

Ignoring Mashiro's question, he ripped open the envelope with his mouth. Inside, there was a single sheet. He opened it up with his hand and checked its content. He was able to find out the result straight away.

Sorata wore a bitter smile at the truth before him.

"Haha."

Dry laughs escaped from his mouth.

The world did not move as he wanted it to. It just wouldn't. Only hard work after more hard work would bring back the results.

So Sorata didn't feel ready to express his feelings. It was too early…

"Hey Shiina… Do you remember?"

"…"

"You know when you came to Sakurasou. I… misunderstood and thought that I should protect you. Since Misaki-senpai was an alien, Jin-senpai was an enemy to all women and Chihiro-sensei is in that state."

"…"

Mashiro didn't say a thing.

"But it turned out that you weren't normal either —you were as strange as Misaki-senpai and you have no idea how surprised I was. Ahh, thinking where did my heart's oasis go… like that."

"…"

“But that didn’t matter.”

“…”

“Why?”

Mashiro’s voice was shivering.

“Because I got the goosebumps watching you draw manga. I still think about it even today. Because it was shocking. What an amazing person. That thought stirred me deep inside… and I wasn’t able to take my eyes off you.”

“…”

“Yeah… so I liked you from that time onwards.”

“Sorata…”

“So don’t disappoint me. I want to cheer you on.”

“Yeah…”

“I’ve been watching you ever since then.”

“…Yeah.”

“And I’ll continue to look at you.”

“Yeah.”

“I won’t lose sight of you. So all you have to do is to continue to draw manga without a care in the world. I won’t go anywhere and I’ll always be by your side.”

“…Sorata.”

Mashiro hugged tightly onto him. It was tough on him, but Sorata didn’t let a sound out.

“You don’t have to look out for me. So when you have the time to, just draw your manga. When you do, I’ll be watching you for sure. Trust me.”

Till the end, Sorata squeezed out his feelings. This was all he wanted to say for now. He couldn’t really say anything else. He couldn’t say up straight that he loved

Mashiro. He couldn't allow himself to.

"Sorata…"

"What?"

When Mashiro whispered his name into his years, his embarrassment and his bashfulness made him to answer roughly. But Mashiro's body was no longer stiff with nervousness. She must've warmed up with Sorata's body heat, because she didn't feel cold either.

"I'll… do my best."

"I won't lose either."

"Yeah…"

As Mashiro nodded her head on his back, he heard a familiar voice.

"For how much longer are you two going to stay like that?"

When Sorata turned around in surprise, he saw Nanami with a complicated expression.

Sorata stood still with Mashiro on his back.

"Hey, Aoyama."

"What?"

"When you say「for how much longer」… for how long have you been watching us?"

Noticing that she had dug her own grave, Nanami looked away. But she didn't forget to throw the counter.

"From the part where you'll be embarrassed to death if others heard it. Do you still want to know?"

"I politely refuse…"

"Hey, Sorata."

“What? Have you still got something to say?”

“…How was the result?”

“Hmm?”

“The game.”

“Ah, then here.”

He passed the sheet to Mashiro on his back. Mashiro opened it up in front of Sorata’s face. Nanami came around to take a look at it.

“…This is…”

Nanami spoke in surprise as she read the heading for the notice.

—To Mr Sorata Kanda, we hope that this letter finds you in good health. Thank you for applying for our company’s「Let’s Make a Game」competition. After assessing your entry, we have decided that we would like to hear more about your idea in a presentation. We apologise for taking up some of your time, but please come to the specified address on the set date. Thank you.

That’s right, he passed. Sorata obviously knew the result since he had opened it just moments ago. But Sorata still wasn’t satisfied after finding out the result. It was nothing noteworthy or praiseworthy. He was happy, but not enough to jump up and down screaming with joy. He already passed the first round 4 months ago as well. He hadn't made progress. All he got was the chance to re-do the nightmarish presentation again.

Furthermore, he already experienced a greater happiness during the culture festival. He still couldn’t forget that thrill and atmosphere. He had tasted success… on the last day of the culture festival - he made up his mind.

He didn’t know if his decision was a right one. He didn’t know, but he didn’t want to become someone who regrets his past. So he tried to push back the bubbling feeling inside him.

How far did he have to go for him to accept himself? Would he ever be satisfied?

He didn’t know. He wouldn’t find out until he reached that place. So he could only go

on. Believing that such a place existed…

“You did it, Kanda.”

“Yeah. Can you help me to practice for my presentation again?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll help too.”

“Then should we apologise to Iida and go back for today? We’ll buy a cake as well.”

“Yeah. It’s already past the booking time that I made at the restaurant… Let’s go back to Sakurasou and eat together.”

Nanami agreed with him.

“Sorata.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve got one more thing to say.”

“Shoot.”

He felt that he could hear one more thing before they go.

“I wore battle panties today.”

“Y-You idiot! W-What are you saying!”

Things turned dangerous in an instant.

“W-What are you saying, Mashiro!”

It was only obvious that Nanami would panic.

“It’s Sorata’s favourite colour —pink. Do you want to see?”

“I really want to see.”

“Kanda, you’re the worst.”

“Reserve yourself, Sorata.”

“I really, really want to see.”

“Don’t say it twice!”

Nanami, who was walking by his side, smacked his head with a backhanded slap. Sorata found that to be funny and laughed at the snowy night.

Part 4

After letting Ayano know that Mashiro was safe, the three of them headed to the hotel to pick up Mashiro's phone, coat and bags. By the time they arrived back at their own station, there was still a half an hour till the date turned over.

In the quiet snowing weather they walked through the familiar red-tiled shopping district towards Sakurasou. With each step, they were definitely slowing down.

"You're heavy."

"So mean."

In the end, they weren't able to find where Mashiro lost her shoes, so Sorata had to give her a piggy-back ride all the way back. They were able to sit on the train, so that was OK, but Sorata never knew that it was this tough to hold a girl who was the same age as him on his back for this long.

His arms and legs were starting to get numb.

"You're heavy."

"I'm not heavy."

"You need to go on diet starting from tomorrow. A no-baumkuchen diet."

"I'll just warn you, Mashiro is considered light even among girls."

Holding a bag, Nanami wore a complicated expression.

Of course, Sorata knew that Mashiro was light. But nevertheless, holding her up for a long period inevitably gave him sore arms.

Complaining, they finally reached the slope leading to Sakurasou.

"Sorata, just a bit longer."

"I know!"

“Sorata.”

“What?!”

“You’re touching my butt.”

“It can’t be helped!”

“Kanda’s a pervert.”

Nanami gave him the daggers.

“Wait, Aoyama? Can you not take it so seriously?”

“I’ll forgive you if you give me a piggy-back ride next time.”

“If that’s all that’s needed for your forgiveness, then I’ll do it right now.”

“…Now is not a good time, so wait until spring… no until summer.”

Nanami whispered to herself, calculating how much weight she had to lose. Sorata felt bad about interrupting her, so he let her be.

“This turned out to be some Christmas Eve.”

“It’ll be perfect when we finish it off with the cake.”

That said cake was in Nanami’s hands. They bought it for cheap when they were switching trains.

Chatting like that, they finally arrived at Sakurasou.

Sorata stopped in front of the door.

“…What should we do? The lights are switched off.”

“D-Don’t tell me Kamiigusa-senpai and Jin-senpai are…”

Nanami’s face gradually blushed brighter and brighter. Sorata could tell even in the dark.

“They might be doing their nightly business…”

“D-Don’t actually say it out loud!”

Nanami quietly warned him.

“A-Anyway, I’m at my limits so I’m going inside.”

“Wait Sorata.”

“Why?!”

“I can wait for a while longer.”

“That’s because you’ve been resting on my back! I’m the one who’s at his limits!”

He walked towards the door without a second thought. Since both of his hands were occupied, Nanami opened the door for him.

“Huh?”

Nanami let out a surprised voice.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s not locked.”

When Nanami opened the door, Sorata went inside first. Inside was pitch black. As expected from their observation outside, none of the lights were on.

“…”

“Aoyama, it’s not good to go and listen to them!”

“I-I’m not going to!”

Sorata let Mashiro down on the floor and turned on the light.

“Woah!”

The reason why he yelled was because he spotted Misaki crouched on the floor when he didn’t expect anyone to be inside. And she only had a bath towel wrapped around her at that…

“Misaki-senpai?”

“…Kouhai-kun.”

It was hard to think of the Misaki he heard was the usual energetic Misaki he knew. Her throat sounded dry and there were trails of teardrops on her neck.

As soon as he saw Misaki’s expression, Sorata’s heart ached. Her bloodshot eyes, messed up hair and despondent expression… No matter how he looked at her, the Misaki he knew was nowhere in sight.

Standing up, Misaki rested her face on Sorata’s chest. Sorata was unable to put his arms around or comfort her. He could only groan wordlessly…

“…I tried.”

“Senpai.”

“I… tried.”

“…I know.”

“I thought this was the only way… I wanted to tell Jin that I wanted to be his! But…”

“…Misaki-senpai.”

“But nothing happened… Jin didn’t do anything to me!”

“…”

“Jin was just being nice… too nice… But that’s not it! That’s not what I wanted!”

Misaki’s cries were painful to his ears. Misaki and Jin had been childhood friends as far as they could remember. They knew each other so well that the word「love」was treated as a joke between them. Misaki gambled against that relationship wanting to change that. But the result was…

“I wanted... Jin to mess me up today!”

And neither Sorata, Mashiro nor Nanami were able to say a thing until Misaki wore herself out crying loudly.

The ticking clock hands continued to move indifferently and the date ticked over to the 25th of December.

The snow continued to fall quietly.

Author's Notes

It's already the 4th volume. … 4th huh.

My previous work was completed in 5 volumes but to think that this series is already up to its 4th…. But I think 「Sakurasou no Pet Kanojou」will continue on for a while longer.

Well, I don't know what will happen tomorrow, so I cannot really be sure….

Then the future talk aside,

"What do you always do?"

I've been getting this question a lot these days. I guess it's because my job isn't very clear with schedules.

Now that I have the chance, I made up my mind to describe my everyday life in a fun and a comedic way, but I'm afraid I couldn't think of a creative idea.

Since my everyday life is only a normal one that would bring 'hmm~, ahh~ I see' from the readers, I think actually talking about my everyday life will bring a lukewarm reaction. I wouldn't be able to meet your expectations. In my heart, I want to yell "But you said that you were going to!" to a certain someone….

But I do apologise about the random story. Thinking "What is an author's notes" made me think seriously about what to write down next time.

Putting that trivial talk aside this time, I would like to use this space to thank some people.

Thank you to everyone who came to the Autumn Signing Event. All of you have encouraged me so much. Thank you for the snacks as well.

It would've been nice if we could've talked for longer, but I was too focused on signing things. I'm sorry. And the surrounding was too noisy as well….

And I also apologise to anyone who didn't win the raffle. It would've been nice if there was a way to offer the prize to everyone, but… We'll ask the publishers to think of a nice idea. If there is another opportunity that is….

Thank you to Keeji Mizoguchi… for drawing the nice winter clothes. Thank you. And I'm always thankful to my editor Araki. Then let's meet everyone again maybe in spring.

Hajime Kamoshida

References

1. ↑ Japanese way of room measuring
2. ↑ He obviously doesn't mean leaf in a literal sense. But a hand print sort of looks like a leaf
3. ↑ Approx $25 USD (13th of April 2013 standard)
4. ↑ Japanese holiday that takes place between the end of April and early May. As the name implies, the entire week is basically a holiday.
5. ↑ Non Playable Characters. Often found in RPGs and has a limited number of lines.
6. ↑ 天災- Pronounced 'tensai'. Means natural disaster
7. ↑ 天才- Pronounced 'tensai'. Means genius. It was a pun on these two 'tensai's
8. ↑ Oh man, this reference will be very hard to get, so please try to follow along. Things in brackets are the Japanese pronunciations. They say that three 'envelopes' (fukuro) are needed for a good marriage life. One's mother(ofukuro), patience (kanninbukuro) and stomach (ibukuro). As you can see, it's sort of like a pun with the –bukuros/fukuro. Similarly, Misaki said that a for lovers, it should be stomach (ibukuro), gloves(tebukuro) and Sorata thought that Misaki was about to say ballsack (kindamabukuro). However, Mashiro heard the 'kin' and guessed purse (kinchikubukuro).
9. ↑ Fried ball shaped flour mix with bits of octopus inside
10. ↑ Japanese style pancake containing a variety of ingredients
11. ↑ Fried noodles
12. ↑ Japanese fish-shaped cake with fillings inside. Most common one is azuki bean filling. On a side note, are these food references making you hungry? Because I'm getting pretty hungry.
13. ↑ **Race Queen**: Something like a pit girl. [1]
14. ↑ Can be seen here.
15. ↑ It seems like it's a Japanese riddle of some sort, where they say "Start with XX and solve it with OO!" and you have to say what XX and OO have in common.
16. ↑ Pun on the same pronunciation of "meaningless" and "not clothed".
17. ↑ 'No more' was said in English.
18. ↑ In Japan, there is a superstition where they say you're letting your happiness escape every time you sigh.
19. ↑ **Onii-chan**: Affectionate/cute way of a sister to address her older brother.
20. ↑ **Kotatsu**: Japanese heated table. [2]

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